



BLUE AND GRAY WEEKLY



Stories of Brave Northern and Southern Boys in the Civil War.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription, \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1904 by Frank Tousey, 24 Union Square, New York.

No. 20

NEW YORK, DECEMBER 23, 1904.

Price 5 Cents.

BEYOND THE "DEAD LINE;" OR, THE BOYS IN GRAY BESIEGED.

BY LIEUT HARRY LEE.



While the two girls were binding Fred Randolph's wounded arm, Will Prentiss grasped a musket and sprang to aid his comrades at the window. "We will hold out to the last!" he cried.

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CHAPTER I.

A BOLD PROJECT.

"Do you think, Captain Prentiss, that you can carry these dispatches across the enemy's rear and intercept General Jackson on his march to strike the enemy on his left flank? It will be a dangerous task, but it must be done. I have great faith in your ability."

The tall handsome youth, who looked doubly handsome in his uniform of gray, saluted General Magruder and replied:

"The Virginia Grays never shirk duty. If it is your order, we stand ready to execute it or die in the attempt."

General Magruder's eyes glistened and he coughed slightly. He turned and looked at his maps.

"I don't doubt you, my boy. I know the valiant work you and your Grays have done in all these battles to keep the foe from entering Richmond. But I don't like to sacrifice you."

"Is it so dangerous a task as that?"

"I fear so. McClellan has the most powerful rear-guard that the world ever saw. In fact, it is called the dead-line, and any luckless company or even regiment of ours that gets over that line is seldom heard of again."

"Very well, General Magruder. We will endeavor not to

get beyond that dead-line unless with heavy reinforcements back of us."

"Ah, there's the rub. You will not be able always to tell when you are on dangerous ground."

"If you have confidence in us, General Magruder, I hope you will give us the chance. These dispatches must be taken to Jackson, I presume?"

"Yes."

"Very good. We will take them to him if you desire."

Captain Will Prentiss spoke confidently. The great Confederate general took up the packet of papers and placed them in his hand.

"Go, Prentiss, and you have my prayers. Intercept Jackson if you can."

"Very well, General Magruder. We shall do our best and endeavor not to get beyond the dead-line."

Young Captain Prentiss saluted. General Magruder returned the salutation. Then the young dispatch-bearer left the tent.

The great Confederate army was split up in many divisions at that time. All were in hot pursuit of McClellan and his retreating Army of the Potomac.

The previous day Magruder had fought the bloody battle of Savage's Station. It had been a victory for the Confederacy.

The Virginia Grays, with whose adventures this story will

have to deal, was an independent company of youthful volunteers from Richmond and vicinity.

They were all youths of good families and sworn to fight for the Confederacy. Their Captain, Will Prentiss, was greatly loved by them, and they would sell their lives for him. He was the son of Colonel Jeff Prentiss, of the staff of President Davis.

Fred Randolph was first lieutenant of the Grays. Dick Walton was second lieutenant. The Grays, though an independent company, were nominally a part of the regiment of Colonel Joe English.

It need hardly be said that Will Prentiss was delighted with the commission he had just received.

He knew that the rear of the Union line had left Savage's Station, and Stonewall Jackson was marching down from the north to make a rear attack.

It was Will's duty to intercept him if he had not passed, or otherwise to overtake him.

It was a mission suited to the Grays. They were rapid marchers and well used to scout duty. They could execute the errand if the thing was within human possibility.

Will Prentiss soon reached the camp of the Grays. He was met by his first lieutenant, Fred Randolph, who greeted him with an eager smile:

"Well, captain, what did the general want? Has he got something new for us?"

Will Prentiss slapped his young lieutenant on the shoulder and said:

"Fred, we are up against the hardest job of the whole war, I believe."

"The deuce! What is it?"

"We have been selected by General Magruder to reconnoiter the rear of the enemy's line and carry dispatches through to General Jackson, who is expected to attack on their left flank some time to-day."

"That sounds good. It looks as if we were to have some lively work."

Will looked at Fred quizzically.

"I don't believe you realize what it means?" he said.

"Yes, I do. A sharp dash across the enemy's rear, a sharp battle with the rear-guard, perhaps, but we will ultimately break through and reach Jackson all right."

Will shrugged his shoulders. He drew a map from his pocket.

"Let us see," he said. "The Army of the Potomac is at the present moment in full retreat down the Quaker road to Malvern."

"Yes."

"Magruder is leaving Savage's Station. Longstreet is marching along the Central road, together with Hill. They expected to cut through the Union line to-day and so divide McClellan's army. Do you follow me?"

"I do."

"Very good! You will see that Jackson is coming down in company with A. P. Hill to strike the Union line from the north. Now all about the rear of McClellan's army is his wonderful rear-guard, which alone has held us back.

The line of that rear-guard is a veritable dead-line. Once you cross it, you never come back."

Fred drew a deep breath.

"I understand all that," he said with a nod. "But if we keep outside that line we shall be all right——"

"We cannot."

"Eh? how is that?"

"Do you see this point on the line of Jackson's march? It is the Grapevine Bridge, on the Chickahominy. He crossed it yesterday. Now he is somewhere south of that. In order to reach him we must therefore either take a long detour around McClellan's rear-guard or cut boldly in between it and the main army."

"The latter move is impossible. It would be suicidal."

"Nothing is impossible for the Virginia Grays," said Will, with a grandiloquent wave of his hand.

Fred laughed and said:

"So far we have not failed. But this may be the rock upon which we wreck our hopes."

"I do not intend to assume this enterprise without first consulting our boys," said Will. "I realize its extreme danger. But I see no other way to execute the wish of General Magruder."

Fred examined the map closely for a time.

"There is no other way," he said. "I believe it can be done."

"It will put us beyond the line of the enemy's rear-guard."

"Or the dead-line, as you have called it?"

"Yes. Of course our move is to make a dash in the cover of the White Oak Swamp. We will not seek a battle anywhere with the foe, but if it comes we will make it a running fight."

"Ought we not to be mounted?"

"No. A cavalcade would attract a great deal more attention. We can push forward on foot more rapidly. Of course, we shall have to dodge videttes and pickets and at some point cut through their line where it is the thinnest. A small body of troops like ours can go where a regiment could never go. I believe it is better to make a dash through some part of their wagon train."

"Their trains are heavily guarded."

"I know it. But once through, we are on the retreat toward Jackson. We can fight and run. They will not chase us further than Jackson's line, I promise you."

Fred whistled softly.

"If we accomplish this feat more ends than one would be gained," he said. "What a shock it would be to McClellan to know that we had sent a detachment through his line at the junction of his rear-guard."

"I should say so, and what a proud day for the Grays. It is the only way to reach Jackson. It must be done."

"Shall I order the assembly?"

"Yes."

Fred gave the order and soon the drum was calling the Grays to the assembly. They responded with great agility. From far and near they came running. In a few minutes they were all in line.

Will then walked out and faced them. His voice was clear and his manner determined as he told them of the contemplated project.

"If there are any among you who shrink from this undertaking," he said, "now is the time to speak. You shall not be compelled to go."

There was an instant of silence. Then a hundred voices went up on the air in a wild cheer. But Will was not satisfied.

He walked nearer and said:

"Let any man who fears to go stand out."

Not one left the ranks. The young captain was satisfied. He turned to Fred and said:

"We will start at once."

The Grays were quickly equipped for the march. They were given ammunition and rations. They were equipped in light marching order.

It was but a short while later that they marched out of the camp. As they passed down the line they made a fine appearance, and many a veteran pulled off his cap and cheered.

Suddenly Will looked up to the left and saw the commanding general and his staff. At once he saluted. General Magruder bowed and fixed his kindly gaze upon the little company.

Then Will gave the order:

"Attention, Grays! Three cheers for General Magruder."

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

The cheer rolled up from their young throats in a rousing volume. The general swung his hat. The Grays marched on down the dusty road and out of sight. General Magruder watched them out of sight.

"Benton," he said to his chief of staff, "I hope those boys will return. I have sent them upon a dangerous mission and I almost reproach myself for it."

"They are a trim little company, general."

"Yes," replied General Magruder; "I have great confidence in young Captain Prentiss. If we had more like him in the service the war would soon be ended and most equitably, too."

CHAPTER II.

IN THE ENEMY'S MIDST.

There was probably not one member of that little company of Virginia Grays who dreamed of the ordeal before them, or it is possible many would have shrunk from attempting it.

Whatever could be said of McClellan's abilities as a general in other respects, certainly no slur could be cast upon his method of conducting a retreat.

The rear-guard formation which he employed was alone the salvation of the Army of the Potomac. It was the only thing that kept the Confederate pursuers at bay.

When it is remembered that he extricated that vast army

from its predicament before Richmond, with the foe pressing like wasps upon three sides, and brought it safely to Harrison's Landing, credit must be given him for undoubted strategical skill.

While many another general might have risked all in a decisive battle, it must not be forgotten that McClellan saved his army, for he was pitted against some of the most able generals of the age, Lee, Jackson, Longstreet and Hill. Much of the war's history is unwritten.

The Grays were soon marching away through cross-roads and lanes along the verge of the White Oak Swamp, below Savage's Station.

The roads leading into the swamp bore signs of Sumner's retreat of the night before. At Savage's Station he had left 25,000 wounded and sick Union soldiers.

The Grays kept on for over an hour.

They saw straggling companies of men in blue. A squad of cavalry once bore down upon them, but a volley drove them away.

They knew that every moment they were nearing the rear-guard of McClellan's army.

In a short while they must be in the zone of deadly danger, which they must pierce in order to gain their object.

Will and Fred walked in front. Neither had taken horses. They knew much of the work before them must be done in swamps where horses would be of little avail.

They now proceeded more cautiously, as was necessary. Far in the distance on an elevation Will saw a pennant which told him that a company of artillery held their post there.

Nearby was a tall tree.

The young captain called a halt beneath it. He was seriously handicapped in the fact that he knew nothing of the exact location of the line of the rear-guard.

It could be easily found, of course, by deliberately marching into it. But this might be fatal.

He had sent scouts ahead, but they returned with conflicting reports.

Some placed the Union line a mile further north, some near at hand. Will had no desire to risk an ambush or capture.

Of a sudden he glanced up into the tree and a startling idea occurred to him. Full seventy feet above his head he saw that there was a support among the branches.

At once he turned to Joe Spotswood, his first sergeant, and said:

"Joe, I wish you would climb this tree and tell me what you see from its top. Can you do it?"

"Can a fish swim?" cried the young sergeant. "Let me show you what I can do."

In an instant he swung himself up into the tree. Up he went with the agility of a monkey.

Will watched him with interest. For some time Joe remained in the tree top. When he came down his face showed that he had seen that which was of importance.

"Well," asked Will, sharply, "what did you see, Joe?"

"Can you climb?" asked the young sergeant.

"Of course I can."

"Then it will pay you to climb up there. I could see the country for miles about. There are Union artillery on each of those three hills. There are lines of troops further north and west. They are falling back slowly."

"The rear-guard," cried Will. "Did you see any signs of an action?"

"Far to the north there is powder smoke in the air."

"Some of our boys probably of Jackson's advance are driving them in. What did you see between the artillery and the infantry?"

"Videttes and small detachments."

"What is the country?"

"Low and somewhat swampy. There are stretches of woods and small hills here and there to border."

"That is our path," said Will. "We shall be between two fires and practically within the dead-line. If we can cut through there without being captured we shall win."

"I would suggest, captain, that you take a look yourself," said Spotswood. "My opinions might not be reliable."

"It is a good suggestion," said Will, unbuckling his belt. "I will do so."

In a few moments the boy captain was making his way upward to the top of the tree. He was surprised at the extent of the view.

He found Joe's observations substantially correct, and after verifying them he descended to the ground.

Will now had decided upon the course which he would pursue.

"Forward, Grays," he said as he buckled on his sword. "We will do or die."

Silently the little company now marched away, into the very jaws of what might prove a death trap.

At any moment they might run upon a Union scout or outpost. Of course, exposure would result and then would ensue the question of a retreat or a sharp fight.

But fortune seemed to favor them for a time.

They kept on for a mile until finally, creeping along in the edge of a swamp, they came to a little path extending through a little cut between two small mounds or hills.

A hail rang out sharply:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

At last they had stumbled upon a picket. Will could only guess how much of a force was behind that picket.

But he knew that it would not do to be found unready. Quickly he gave orders and the Grays deployed in line of battle along the edge of the swamp.

They were not a moment too soon. The picket's hail had called out the Union guard and the alarm had been given.

Shots came whistling into the swamp and blue-clad figures were seen above. But Will saw by their uniforms that they were not infantrymen.

They were cavalymen and did not seem to be in heavy force.

Will had no desire of bringing on a hot engagement. He knew that fighting was something to be avoided.

The noise of a hard engagement would attract the atten-

tion of other bodies of troops and might result disastrously for the Grays.

So Will held his men in check and waited. The cavalymen grew bolder and began to draw in to closer quarters.

Will had decided upon his move. He waited until the foe had drawn quite near. He saw that they equalled his command numerically.

It was his purpose to end the conflict as quickly as possible and avoid the noise of heavy firing. So he gave the order to hold fire, and when the right moment came he sprang up and cried:

"Attention, Grays! Fire!"

A sweeping volley mowed the line of Union soldiers. It staggered them, for its force was unexpected.

Then, with instant resolve, Will shouted:

"Fix bayonets! Charge!"

Out of their concealment sprang the Grays. Up the little slope they went like a whirlwind.

The cavalymen had no bayonets. They had only their carbines and sabres. The cold steel drove them back like a frightened flock of sheep.

Over the hill they fled in a panic. Into their camp they rushed and sprung into saddle.

A moment later they were riding away like the wind. The Grays were victorious. But Will knew that they were to pay for their victory.

That a Confederate detachment was within the line of their rear-guard would now be known to the officer in command. No effort would be spared to capture or destroy them.

That they should get through undiscovered had been too much to expect, as Will now realized.

However, it would be fatal to remain inactive where they were. There was but one thing to do, and this was to change base as quickly as possible.

Of course, the best way to do this was to boldly push ahead.

The Grays now went ahead at a rapid pace until suddenly coming out of the line of the swamp they saw open fields, with lines of rail fence.

A highway bordered these fields. As the Grays reached this, a sight met their gaze which startled them.

For a moment Will Prentiss believed all was lost.

Down the highway and but a few hundred yards distant was a heavy body of Union troops.

There were at least three regiments, or three thousand men. To be discovered by such a force would mean capture.

For an instant Will felt sure that they had been seen. There was no time to retreat to the swamp. They would be seen in their present position.

What was to be done?

Will for an instant was overwhelmed with doubt and horror. Then he acted on quick impulse.

The grass was knee high along the line of rail fence. The farmers had not been able to harvest it as yet.

Will gave the order in a low tone:

"Down, Grays! Lie flat in the grass behind the fence."

The order was obeyed instantly. There they lay crouch-

ing under the lower rail of the Virginia fence concealed in the grass. The Union troops were sure to pass within a few yards of them.

It was a thrilling moment. Will Prentiss was keenly on the alert. He had never experienced a harder strain upon the nerves.

Nearer came the Union regiments. Now they could be seen as in irregular file they came trooping by.

With guns at rest, knapsacks heavily strapped on their shoulders, the jaded Union guard marched by. They were so near that every line of their faces could be seen.

And but a few yards distant in the grass crouched the crack company of the Confederate army, the Virginia Grays.

Had one of the Union soldiers chanced to advance to the fence, or for some reason leaped it, the result would have been startling.

But nothing of the kind happened. The Union regiment marched by with rank and file. In their rear came a few stragglers.

CHAPTER III.

THE BATTERY ON THE HILL.

One of these, a fair-faced youth, with his head bandaged, staggered down from the highway and sank down in the grass by the rail fence.

He was so near to Will Prentiss that the boy captain could have touched him. He gave a deep sigh and lay wearily on his side.

Not a move was made by one of the Grays until the Union regiments were far out of sight and hearing. Then Will lightly sprung to his feet.

In an instant the Grays followed suit. It is hardly necessary to say that they realized fully how close a call they had.

The straggler lying by the fence in his turn sprung up.

His pallid face showed fear and amazement. He started for the highway, but Will called out in sharp tones:

"Halt!"

In an instant the fellow obeyed. He stood trembling like an aspen.

"All right, Johnny Reb," he cried. "I give up. You've got me."

"Come down here, my friend," said Will; "I want to talk with you."

The order was obeyed. The prisoner was a youth, and it could be seen that he had suffered much from his wound. He staggered to the fence and stood trembling.

"Spotswood, give him a little brandy," said Will; "he is weak."

The sergeant passed the young soldier a flask of brandy. He seized it eagerly and placed it to his lips.

The draught he took brought the color back into his face, and he said:

"I thank you, captain. I did not expect this kind of treatment."

"You will be treated well if you make no trouble," said Will. "We are not bushwhackers nor Turks."

"I can see that," said the young soldier. "You are the finest looking company of Confederates I've seen."

"Thank you," replied Will. "I suppose you have lost your company?"

"My company?" said the young soldier with a hollow ring in his voice. Then he smiled in a ghastly way.

"We held the line at Savage's Station yesterday," he said. "The enemy charged through our regiment four times. I don't believe twenty men in my company besides myself are alive to-day."

The utter misery and despair in the young soldier's voice touched his hearers. The Grays drew closer.

"It is too bad," said Will. "But we had companies wiped out on our side also. It is part of the game of war. What is your name?"

"Ethan Cornell. I belong to Company G of the Massachusetts Volunteers. I am afraid I'm done with fighting for a time. I am wounded on the head and there's a ball in my side. I wanted to get to the hospital and find a surgeon."

Will Prentiss could only feel pity for the poor fellow. He had no thought of keeping him as a prisoner.

"Well, Ethan," he said, "if you will answer me a few questions I will set you free. You shall not be kept a prisoner."

The young soldier's face lit up.

"You are kind," he said brokenly. "I have an aged mother at home. I want to live to get back to her."

"I hope you will," said Will earnestly. "Now tell me, is there still a heavy guard west of us at present?"

Ethan Cornell's eyes opened wide and he held up one hand.

"Are you as a company alone here?" he asked. "Have you no support?"

"We are alone."

"My soul! You are inside the lines of our rear-guard! You are surrounded by regiments and detachments of our army. You will be captured."

"I don't think so," said Will quietly. "At least, we hope to escape such a thing. I know we are beyond the dead-line."

"Yes. Any Confederate caught inside this line is shot at sight," replied Ethan. "The retreat of the army can only be covered safely by using heroic means."

"I understand that," said Will. "Now you must make me a promise."

"What?"

"You will say nothing of having seen us. You will not betray us."

"I will give you that promise," said Ethan readily. "I hope you will get through also, but I fear you will not."

"That remains to be seen," said Will. "I will say good-bye."

"Good-bye."

The Grays vaulted the fence and crossed the highway. The young soldier limped away down the road.

It was now that the Grays encountered the greatest risk with which they had yet met. The open fields must be crossed, and it seemed as if they must certainly be seen.

There was nothing else to do.

Far beyond the blue line of hills in the distance was Jackson and his corps. No doubt they were already debouching upon the low lands below to attack the Union flank.

Will was anxious that the dispatches should be placed in Jackson's hands before the attack was made. The Grays pushed on in irregular line.

Suddenly from one of the distant elevations there was the boom of a cannon and a shell went hissing up into the air to explode above them.

"By jingo!" cried Fred. "We are seen, Will. That artillery has a line on us."

"Push on," gritted the young captain. "If we can reach the woods yonder I think we shall be all right."

But it was a long ways across those wide fields. Panting and exerting every nerve to the utmost the Grays ran on.

It was plain that the alarm was being given in most lively fashion. Other batteries began to thunder, and then a line of infantry appeared over the brow of an elevation on their left.

Musket shots were fired at them. The shells were exploding all around them. As yet none had hit the mark.

On ran the Grays. Now they reached the last fence.

It was of the Virginia pattern, zig-zag and five bars high. The Grays vaulted it and started for the cover of the woods.

Now, to their dismay, another danger presented itself. From the ravine on their right there surged a line of blue.

For a moment Will Prentiss was dismayed. It seemed as if there was no hope, and that they must be captured.

But they kept on, though a volley of musketry reached them and several of the boys fell in their tracks. A moment, and they were among the oaks.

Instantly Will shouted:

"Halt! Right about face! Deploy in line of battle!"

The order was executed instantly. Then the Grays returned the fire of their pursuers. The blue line was shattered and fell back.

The victory momentarily belonged to the Grays. But Will Prentiss knew that it would never do to make a stand where they were.

So he ordered the line to fall back slowly through the woods. After a time the woods again began to grow thin and open country was seen beyond.

Will caught the glimmer of water and saw the current of a wide creek. His heart sank as he recognized in it an obstacle that might be insurmountable.

With this in their rear and no visible means of crossing it, their fate would seem to be certainly sealed.

But just as they began to emerge from the woods Will saw that a sort of little rocky hill framed over the waters of the creek. In an instant he decided upon what seemed the only move left to him.

This was to occupy this point of vantage and make a last stand. He had begun to see the likely failure of his plans to cut through and join Jackson. The foe were all around

him. To surrender was out of the question. To die as brave men should, holding out to the last, seemed the bravest and best plan.

So he gave the order to ascend the hill. The Grays changed their course and began to climb the little rocky eminence.

But they had only accomplished half the ascent when a startling thing happened. A blinding flash, a stunning roar, broke upon the air, and a cannon ball went hurtling over their heads.

The truth was seen at once. The hill was occupied by a masked battery.

It was a dampening revelation to the Grays, and for a moment Will Prentiss was undecided how to act. The Grays wavered and the line began to break.

In an instant the boy captain's mind was made up. He knew that to retreat was impossible.

The foe was right behind him. To the right was the creek. Ahead was the masked battery. Just how powerful it was the young captain could only guess.

But he had no thought of surrender. What seemed to him the only feasible move left was to risk all in a wild attempt to charge the hill and capture the battery.

"By jingo, we're in a bad box now, Will," cried Fred Randolph as he came rushing up. "What shall we do?"

"There is only one thing."

"What?"

"We must capture the battery."

For a moment the young lieutenant stood overcome with doubt. The gunners above were depressing their guns and shells were exploding all around them.

There was no time to lose. If it was necessary to charge and capture the battery the quicker it was done the better.

Will saw this at a glance. He not only measured the enormity of the enterprise in that moment, but he also knew that a repulse meant the wiping out of his company.

But he would not consider the latter. The battery must be won. He knew every boy in his company stood ready to give his life.

Drawing his sword Will sprung in front of them.

"Virginia Grays," he cried, "we are at this moment facing the foe in ambush. It is necessary for us to gain this hill and to capture the battery. Let every man do his duty. Fix bayonets!"

A cheer went up from the throats of the Grays. They were not the ones to shrink from peril.

Quickly they fixed their bayonets and came up in closer formation. Then Will gave the order:

"Forward! Charge!"

With a wild hurrah, the Grays went on up the little hill. What followed seemed ever afterward to Will Prentiss like a dream.

Smoke and fire belched down the hillside. The ground trembled and the air shook with awful concussion.

It might have tried the nerves of even veterans. But the Grays rushed on and soon had topped the slope. They were now right in upon the gunners.

A terrific struggle followed. A battle of no ordinary sort it became.

CHAPTER IV.

BESIEGED.

Up that cannon-swept slope the Virginia Grays had charged into the thick of the smoke, with shot and shell plunging through their line.

Over a dozen of the boys fell on that hillside. But the thin gray line did not waver.

It went on and up steadily until the summit was reached, and then followed a deadly hand-to-hand struggle with the defenders of the battery.

Desperately the Grays fought. They knew that all depended upon capturing the battery.

They rushed over the breastwork, hurling the Union gunners back. In an incredibly short space of time all was over.

The defenders of the battery fled incontinently down the other side of the hill. They did not even have time to spike their guns or blow up their ammunition.

The Grays had won the battle. They did not pursue the foe. With a cheer they ran along the parapet and fired after them.

It was now seen that they had won a valuable victory. The redoubt was solidly constructed, facing all sides but that toward the creek, which was quite precipitous.

There were four field pieces mounted in embrasures in the earthen wall. They could be depressed to sweep the hillside.

What saved the Grays from total annihilation had been the fact that their approach had not been at once discovered by the foe. This had given them time to cover half the distance.

This was an advantage which had certainly been in their favor. But they had won, and not only were they intrenched but they had the guns and plenty of ammunition.

It would have suited Will better to have been able to keep on to effect a junction with General Jackson.

But now that this was proved out of the question the next best thing was this position of defense. Will believed they could hold it against a large force.

Very quickly he familiarized himself with the place. He inspected the guns and the caissons and found that they were all right. He assigned his boys to different posts inside the works and put things in shape for defense none too soon, for the regiment of Union soldiers they had seen on their right in the ravine were coming up rapidly. They were already at the foot of the hill.

Among the Virginia Grays there were a number who had familiarized themselves with artillery. These now took charge of the guns.

They were shotted and depressed very rapidly so as to be ready for attack. The others, with their muskets, lay under the cover of the breastwork.

The defeated artillerymen had now rallied at the foot of the hill, and seeing reinforcements at hand joined them in the attempt to retake the battery.

Up the hill came a soldier bearing a white flag. Will answered the signal and went out to meet him.

"Are you the commanding officer?" the truce-bearer asked.

"I am," replied Will. "What can I do for you?"

"Colonel Greene, of the New York Volunteers, sends you this message. I am to wait for a reply."

Will took the missive and glanced it over. It is hardly necessary to say that he was deeply interested.

"To the Officer in Command: You are summoned to surrender at once. The whole Union army surrounds you, and it is useless for you to make resistance. Better terms will be offered you now than you can get later. Answer by truce-bearer.

"(Signed) WARREN GREENE, Colonel N. Y. V."

Will was for a moment undecided what answer to make. He had no thought of surrender. Yet he knew that it was wise for him to delay his opponent's plans of attack as long as he could. So he wrote on the back of the message as follows:

"TO COLONEL WARREN GREENE:

"I regret that I cannot consider your demand for surrender until I have a definite statement of your best terms. Kindly let me know. I will then give you my answer.

"(Signed) WILL PRENTISS, Capt. Virginia Grays."

The truce-bearer departed with this message. Will now called Fred Randolph, and with their glasses they began to study the country below.

They saw the Union regiment at the foot of the hill reinforced by the defeated artillerists. At that moment, though, they saw no other signs of the foe.

Will saw that they were outnumbered ten to one. But he knew that they had the advantage of position and the guns.

"Our only chance is to make as brave a defense as we can," said Will. "Of course, we are in a bad position and may have to surrender at any time."

"That is true," agreed Fred. "I surely hope that we may hold out."

"I regret that I am unable to deliver the dispatches to General Jackson. It means a failure of our plans."

"We will not yet abandon hope," said Fred eagerly. "Something may turn up to enable us to do so."

"I fear not," said Will. "There is, of course, a chance for us to hold off our opponents here long enough to enable us to be relieved by the attack of General Jackson on the Union flank. The rear-guard which faces us now will be withdrawn to meet that attack."

This was plainly their one hope. On the whole, the two young officers felt quite confident. Just then the truce-bearer was seen returning.

Will advanced to meet him. The fellow saluted and said:

"Colonel Greene returns his compliments and sends a reply to your message."

Will took the message and read:

"CAPTAIN WILL PRENTISS:

"My terms are unconditional surrender. If you do not accede at once to these terms I shall attack you without delay. Yours,

"WARREN GREENE, Colonel Commanding."

Will smiled and then lightly wrote on the other side with his pencil:

"We will surrender this redoubt if we are allowed to march out and beyond your lines westward with our arms and unmolested. Otherwise we shall defend our position to the last.

"Yours, CAPT. WILL PRENTISS."

The truce-bearer departed. Will went back into the redoubt and said:

"Every man to his post. See that every gun is shotted and trained upon the foe. Wait the order to fire."

The Grays obeyed to the letter. Then followed a period of suspense.

It took some time for the truce-bearer to deliver his message. But after a while the blue lines below were seen to be massing.

"They are coming," cried Sergeant Joe Spotswood. "Are we ready?"

The Grays crept to the breastwork and levelled their muskets. They waited and watched for the advance of the foe.

And now they were seen in double column moving up the hill. An impressive spectacle they made.

The long bristling lines of bayonets, the blue uniforms behind them, made a picture once seen never to be forgotten.

Especially is it impressive to those who in the trenches are waiting for the encounter which is inevitable.

Straight up the slope came the charging Union line. In a few moments it was at least half way up the ascent.

Will had waited until he knew that it would be safe to wait no longer.

The foe came on rapidly now. There was an air of confidence about them which seemed to bespeak victory. The officers walked beside the files sword in hand.

Then Will Prentiss gave the word:

"Fire!"

From the breastwork leaped a living sheet of flame as the muskets spoke. Then there was an earthquake shock and a deafening roar as the guns spoke.

The smoke rolled down the descent in mighty billows. It hid the contestants from sight for a time.

But the Grays did not wait for the smoke pall to lift. They volleyed again and the guns were swabbed and reloaded and fired as rapidly as they could be.

But when no swarming mass of blue came up through the smoke and it was apparent to Will that the foe must be repulsed he gave the order to cease firing.

But the guns were reloaded and the gunners stood on the alert. The infantry also held their muskets in readiness.

And slowly the smoke pall lifted. No charging line came up through it. As the moments passed it became a certainty that the foe had been repulsed.

Then, as the breeze suddenly lifted the smoke, a thrilling scene was witnessed. The hillside was covered with dead and wounded.

Below at the base of the hill was the confused mass of the Union regiment. Their officers were reforming them for a second attack.

But it was not made. Time passed and the order to advance was not given. Presently Will saw the reason for this.

Up the distant highway there was dashing a troop of artillery. Through his glass Will counted five guns. On the caissons sat the gunners.

The colonel of the Union regiment was waiting for this reinforcement. An anxious light crept into Will's eyes.

"Whew!" exclaimed Lieutenant Randolph. "That looks rather bad for us, eh, captain? They have the odds on us now."

"Not exactly," said Will. "We have the height of land. They may throw a few shells up here, but we can measure weapons with them, for we have six guns, and I think, if anything, our calibre is better than theirs."

This was certainly true. The Virginia Grays were not captured yet.

The Union regiment now began to deploy. It was plain that another charge would not be made at once.

The artillery company now galloped to the highest eminence near that was in range and began to unlimber their guns.

"Well, that is cool," said Will with a smile. "I wonder if they think we are going to remain inactive here while they get ready to give us their fire. Just throw a few shells over there, Spotswood."

The sergeant, who was the temporary artillery captain, was only too glad to obey the order.

Two of the guns were trained upon the distant eminence. Shells were sent into the midst of the Union artillery.

One gun was disabled, several horses killed and the gunners scattered. A desperate attempt was made to return the fire, but in vain.

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE MESSAGE.

So hot was the fire of the Grays that the Union artillery was forced to retreat from the eminence, leaving one gun dismounted behind them.

There now remained only four guns against the Grays' six. This was most cheering to the Confederate boys.

"Steady, boys!" called Will in his most reassuring tone. "We have them whipped to a certainty."

"On my word, I believe it," cried Fred Randolph. "They have not the guns to match us in an artillery duel."

There was a lull now in the firing. The Union battery was out of range.

But now again the truce-bearer was seen coming up the hill. Will went out to meet him.

He handed the young captain a written note. Will opened it and read:

"CAPTAIN PRENTISS:

"As you will see, we have artillery now to support us, and we can certainly shell you out of your works. In any event we can besiege you and starve you out. However, I will modify my terms a little and allow officers to retain their side arms and be admitted to parole. Answer at once.

"Yours, GREENE, Colonel Commanding."

Will crumpled the letter in his hands and said:

"You will return to your colonel and tell him that we propose to maintain our position here to the last."

The truce-bearer saluted and departed. Then Will went back to the redoubt.

The Union artillery now began to move up slowly and open fire. Some of their shells exploded on the redoubt, but fortunately did no harm.

But the Grays returned the fire so hotly that the foe retired. Then it was seen that the Union colonel had decided upon another style of game.

He established his men in a long line and they began to throw up trenches. It was an astonishing state of affairs to the Grays.

That a mere handful of men should be able to hold at bay ten times their number was indeed surprising. Yet it was a position in which one hundred might hold one thousand at bay.

"We are besieged," said Fred Randolph. "That means a long stay here unless they get reinforcements sufficient to overwhelm us."

"I doubt the latter exigency," said Will, "though they may send for them. The soldiers of the main army are marching in retreat and they will not turn back. When the rear-guard falls back, which ought to be within the next twenty-four hours, this regiment will do the same. We shall then be outside the dead-line and safe once more."

Colonel Greene now sent a flag of truce asking permission to send a detachment to remove the dead and wounded soldiers on the hillside.

Will of course granted the request. Meanwhile another incident of importance had occurred.

On the water side of their fortress the Grays had felt safe from attack. But now a cry from a picket on that side attracted Will's attention.

He at once hastened thither and saw the sentry gesticulating and pointing to the water below.

The boy captain glanced down to the water and gave a thrilled start. Swimming with ease across the stream was a colored lad.

He seemed to have the bluff as his objective point. But it

happened that in his present position he was a mark for the guns of the Union line where it touched the lower bank of the creek.

Bullets splashed the water all about him. But he swam and dived repeatedly like a duck, so that the bullets did not hit him.

In a few moments he was so far under the lee of the bluff as to be out of range and was safe.

He crept out of the water and shook himself like a dog on the little narrow strip of sand below. He looked up and made eager gestures.

"He has a message for us," cried Fred. "Let some one go down."

"No," said Will; "let him come up if he can."

"It is too steep."

"Let us see."

Will leaned over the edge and shouted loudly:

"Hello! What do you want?"

"May I come up, massa?" was the reply.

"Yes, if you can."

The next moment the negro lad was climbing the steep bluff like a monkey. Up he came, hands and feet, and never once losing his hold.

So it happened that presently he crept over the edge of the bluff. He straightened himself up and ducked his woolly head to Will.

"Is you de captain?" he asked.

"I am," replied Will.

"Den, I'se to gib you a message from Miss Clyde. I has it here in mah pocket."

The little negro drew from his blouse a bit of note paper. He handed it to Will, who took it with interest and genuine surprise.

"How is this?" he asked. "Who is Miss Clyde?"

The boy jerked his thumb over his shoulder and replied:

"She am Missy Clyde, an' she libs ober dere in de big brick house. She am mah missy. Eberybody knows Missy Clyde."

The lad spoke with such unction and confidence in his mistress that Will and Fred both smiled. But Will now read the note:

"To the Captain: From my window I can see the dear old flag of our Confederacy flying from a point where but a few hours ago I saw the Union flag waving. That tells me that you have captured the place and that perhaps our army is coming this way. If this is true, as I hope, I shall be glad. But I fear it will come too late to help me in my distressing dilemma, for I am sorely in need of help. This house is within the line of the Union rear-guard. For a few days past there has been a reign of terror on this plantation. A company of the Yankee soldiers have quartered themselves here. Their captain is an insolent fellow, who has offered me and my cousin, Mabel March, a number of insults. We fear him greatly, for he is not to be trusted. We two young women are quite alone here save for a few slaves. My parents are away on a visit in another county. We are much afraid of these soldiers, whom we have been forced to

take as guests. They do as they please about the plantation, and we are afraid of them. We long to see our own soldiers in uniform marching by. If you will not be transgressing your duty we would be glad if you would come over and drive these Yankee rascals away. By so doing you will confer a great favor on, Yours sincerely,

"ANNIE CLYDE."

Will handed this surprising epistle to Fred, who read it with interest and exclaimed:

"This is infamous. We ought to look into it at once, Will. I will take a guard and go over there if you wish."

Will frowned in disapproval.

"Have we not trouble enough in front of us?" he asked.

"We cannot deplete our force here at this time."

"Yes, yes," agreed Fred. "Ah, well, that is true. But I say, captain, what will you do about it?"

Captain Prentiss was silent for some moments. Finally he turned to the boy, and giving him a coin, said:

"Go back and tell the lady that I am her protector. I will see that no harm comes to her. Tell her that we are coming to her rescue."

The little negro nodded and looked wise. Then he turned a hand-spring, and running to the verge of the cliff disappeared over it.

A few seconds later Will saw him again in the water of the creek and swimming for the other shore.

Again the Union guards opened fire on him. But once more he dodged them and soon reached the opposite shore.

Here he plunged into the woods and disappeared. Will turned to Fred with a deep breath.

"Well, what do you think of that for an incident?"

"I think you have made a serious promise."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you have promised to go to the aid of that young woman."

"Well, what of that?"

"Why, how can you do it?" stammered Fred. "You will have to break your word. We can never get there."

"No, I will not," replied Will. "I am going over to see Miss Clyde."

Fred stared at him a moment.

"Just now you declared to me that it would be folly to deplete our forces at the present time."

"I have reconsidered that."

Fred shrugged his shoulders and scanned the surface of the creek below.

"Do you think it is safe or possible to leave this place? We are secure here for the present, but the moment we leave here we shall have the foe down upon us like a nest of hornets."

"You misunderstand me," said Will, "it is not my purpose to take our whole company over there."

Fred stared again at his young captain.

"You don't mean to go over alone?"

"With perhaps a picked few of our boys."

Fred whistled softly.

"I can't see what you will gain by that," he said. "You

could not meet the situation alone. Doubtless there is a full company of Union soldiers quartered on that plantation. What could you do against them alone?"

"Very little," replied Will. "That is not my plan, Fred. The young woman has sent to us for aid. We must respond if it is in our power."

"Certainly."

"Now my plan is to steal over there and make a personal answer to her appeal. Also I will see just what the situation is. If I find that we cannot go to their aid I will bring the young women back with me. We can thus assure them of safety."

"Unless we are overwhelmed."

"Certainly. At least the situation could be no worse for them than it is at present."

The young lieutenant's face cleared.

"You are right, Will," he said. "I can see that your plan is the most logical and reasonable one. But I don't think you ought to go alone."

"Nor shall I. I mean to pick half a dozen of the boys. We will slip down the bluff and swim the creek."

"But you will be exposed to the fire of the Union sentries."

"That will amount to little. The risk of their hitting us is slight."

"But, what if they attack while you are gone?"

"Meet the attack just as if I was here," said Will. "Push them back again. But just look here!"

Will led Fred to the edge of the parapet. From this position they could see the whole besieging line.

"Do you see?" he said. "They do not intend to attack at once. I shall not expect to be absent more than an hour. I feel that the appeal of these young women ought to be answered."

Fred's scruples were removed.

"So do I," he cried. "I think it can be done, too, Will. But I wish you would entrust the mission to me."

"Why?"

"You are the captain and the most valuable man. If anything happens——"

Will laughed merrily.

"We will not anticipate that," he said, "but if anything happens to me you are captain."

Fred shook his head.

"I could not fill your shoes," he said; "nor would I have the heart to try."

Will threw an arm over the young lieutenant's shoulders. They had been friends from infancy.

"I know you want to go, Fred," he said, "so I am going to select you as one of the six to accompany me."

CHAPTER VI.

THROUGH THE PICKET GUARD.

Fred Randolph gave a little cry of surprise and delight. He looked at Will eagerly.

"Do you mean that?"

"I do."

"But what will become of things here if we both go? Who will take charge?"

"Our second lieutenant, Dick Walton, has long proved himself to be an efficient officer," said Will. "I shall expect him to hold the foe until we can return. We will not be so far away. We shall hear the attack if any is made."

Fred Randolph gave a shout of delight.

"We are to start at once?"

"Yes."

"Who are the others?"

"Pick out five of our privates. Select any you choose. But they must be swimmers."

Fred hurried away eagerly. He was in a greatly excited state over the matter. It was not long before he had all arrangements made.

Dick Walton was placed in command of the Grays. Five of the privates were selected. All was now ready.

Will had planned the matter of crossing the creek in a skilful way. Some timbers had been used in the construction of the battery. A few of these were slid down the bluff to the water's edge.

Then the little party descended. Under the brow of the bluff they were safe, for none of the Union force had crossed the creek.

With the timbers a small raft was made. On it was piled their weapons, cartridge boxes and their clothing. Then a couple of the Grays pushed the raft out and swam beside it.

Will and the others now began to cross, one at a time, to make as small a target as possible.

The Union sentries peppered away at them until the Confederate defenders in the fort sent out a detachment to answer the fire.

Then the little party got across in safety.

On the opposite bank they quickly resumed their uniforms and weapons. Part of the project had been accomplished. They were now exiled from their comrades and in deadly risk of death or capture.

But Will at once set out in the direction given him by the little negro. They pressed on through a heavy growth of oaks for a ways.

Then they emerged into a lane between high rail fences. Beyond a distant hedge they saw the upper stories of a plantation house.

The house was built of brick in most substantial manner and had great piazzas about it. There were many out-buildings, including the quarters of the slaves.

Nearby waved a Union flag from a high flag pole. The little detachment of Grays saw the white tents of the Union company's encampment.

In the lane they paused, conscious of the danger before them.

There was no doubt a picket guard near. To encounter it would mean discovery and perhaps embarrassing results.

So they moved with great caution through the lane. It was not long before through the rail of the fence they saw the picket line.

The sentinels strolled back and forth with regular step. It was not possible to pass them.

Behind the fence in the sunken lane Will Prentiss and his companions crouched.

"Well," said Fred Randolph in an undertone, "this looks dubious, don't it? The place seems to be in the hands of the foe."

"If we had the rest of the boys here we'd soon sweep them away," said Will.

"Indeed we would."

"As it is, however, I see no way but to use a stratagem. We must pass that picket guard if we want to rescue the fair inmates of that house."

"That's right," agreed Fred. "But can you think of a stratagem?"

"Not at present."

The young captain, however, was not of the kind to submit to defeat. His ready wit soon devised a plan.

He saw that the negro quarters were just within the line of guards. They were further from the sunken lane, but there was a small cornfield between the huts and the lane.

Will knew that it would not be altogether good policy to trust the negroes. In the majority of cases they were friendly to the Union soldiers.

But, as this seemed the only way of approaching the house without being seen, he decided to try it. He whispered his plan to his companions.

They crept along the lane until they reached the little strip of corn. Then they crept into the cover of the green stalks. In this manner they were able to approach very close to the picket.

They could now see the plantation house plainly. A few negroes were lounging about. In the distance Union troops could be seen drilling.

If the boys could only succeed in letting the two fair inmates of the house know of their presence all would be well. But how to do this was the question.

Fred and Will conferred for a while in whispers. Finally the young lieutenant said:

"There is only one way, Will."

"What?"

"We must overpower the picket guard."

The young captain was silent a moment. He had thought of this plan. It might not be altogether difficult to do this, but that did not altogether solve the problem in his belief.

"What next?" he asked.

"All will then depend upon a quick dash to the house. If we can get back before the grand rounds we will be all right."

Will was reflective. There was much risk to the plan. But he saw no other. It was not his nature to shrink from a perilous undertaking.

So he said decisively:

"Fred, your plan is the only feasible one. We will try it."

"The question now is how to overpower the guard."

"Yes."

For some moments all pondered the problem. One of the

Grays, whose name was Bob Pendleton, was an acrobat. He was a youth of brilliant ideas and ready wit.

"Captain Prentiss," he said modestly, "I think I see a way to do it."

"All right, Bob. What is your plan?"

"Will you leave it to me?"

"Yes."

"I suppose he has got to be choked off, so that the other guards won't hear him. I could kill him easily enough, but I haven't got the nerve to do that."

"It's all right, Bob. I wouldn't kill him. That is too much like murder. We simply want to overpower and gag him."

"All right. I'll do the trick."

Pendleton spoke confidently. He crept away now in the edge of the cornfield.

The beat traversed by the sentry was synonymous with that of the others. It was so arranged that no part of the line was ever out of sight of one or the other of the sentinels, for as one approached the end of his beat the other sentinel was at the far end of his.

There was one moment when the sentry turned to retrace his steps that his back might be turned to a foe in hiding. This was the moment which Bob Pendleton had chosen.

Crouching in the cover of the green corn, he waited. The sentry came to the end of his beat, shifted his gun and walked back. In an instant from the corn shot a silent crouching figure.

With a silent spring like a panther the acrobat went into the air. The guard half turned his head.

But it was too late. He went down with a gurgling cry just as the fingers of Pendleton closed on his windpipe.

There was a struggle in the dust. But Will and the others were now on hand and the Union sentry was securely bound and gagged.

Swiftly and silently they worked. There was the imminent danger of being seen at any moment by some one crossing the yard.

But, as luck had it, no one was in sight. Not even any of the negroes were near.

Quickly the helpless sentry was dragged into the cover of the corn. Here the Grays waited a moment.

The obstacle between them and the house was removed. Yet they waited an instant with instinctive apprehension.

But the receding footsteps of the sentry on the next beat was heard. The coast seemed clear. Will was the first to emerge and strike for the house.

He crossed the space quickly and gained the broad porch. The others were right at his heels.

It was a daring thing they were doing. The door was slightly ajar.

Will pushed it open and stepped in. A grand old hall, with antique balustrade, was revealed to him.

Softly he entered, followed by the others, and as he did so he heard voices. They came from an adjoining room, and the intonation startled him. Every word came plainly to his hearing.

"So you scorn my offer, Miss Mabel? We shall see! You will find that I am not a man to be trifled with."

"Captain Clifford, I demand that you persecute me no further. I will never consent to be your wife."

"What is your prejudice against me? I am a gentleman and a soldier. I have wealth and a good name."

"I do not love you."

"But you may learn."

"You have my answer."

"I will not accept it. By the name of Cæsar, you shall not defy me. I will have you in spite of all the powers of heaven and earth. No, you need not try to escape me."

A shrill feminine scream and the sounds of a scuffle followed. This was enough for Will Prentiss.

CHAPTER VII.

DARING WORK.

The young captain of the Grays bounded into the room beyond the great hall on the instant. What he saw gave him a thrill.

A young girl, slight and beautiful, of the Southern type, was writhing in the arms of a powerful man dressed in the Union blue of a captain.

At sight of Will the Union officer relaxed his hold upon the young girl. He reeled back and glared at Will in sheer amazement.

"Fiends and furies!" he cried. "What's this? Confederates in this house? Enemies within our lines? Treachery!"

Will confronted Captain Clifford with stern face.

"You scoundrel!" he said tensely. "You dare to offer that young woman such indignity! You ought to be shot!"

The young girl, recovering from her terror, stood regarding the Grays with eager surprise and joy.

"Ah, heaven be praised!" she cried. "It is my own people at last."

"Yes," cried Will, "and here to defend you to the last drop of blood in our veins."

The Union captain was white but cool and crafty. He began to sidle toward the door, but Will cried:

"Stand where you are! You cannot leave this room! You are a prisoner!"

"A prisoner," gritted Clifford. "Who are you?"

"I am Captain Will Prentiss, of the Virginia Grays."

"How dare you come here? This house is in our lines. You are within the dead-line of our rear-guard——"

"Your rear-guard will soon be a thing of the past," said Will coldly. "Our advance guard is at hand and driving you into the Potomac."

Clifford's eyes gleamed.

"Is that so?" he said softly. "I have heard no guns. I have been ordered to hold this outpost. If our rear-guard has passed I have not been notified."

"However that may be," said Will. "You are our pris-

oner. Grays, you may bind him. If he makes an outcry gag him as well."

"It will hardly be necessary to do that," said Clifford. "Of course, I surrender at discretion. But I want to tell you that unless you are backed by a superior force your position is a bad one. My soldiers are sure to find you. You have managed to get through my lines, but you will not find it so easy to get out again."

Will made no reply.

While his men were binding Clifford he advanced and bowed before the young woman.

"Pardon me," he said. "I am Captain Will Prentiss. I am here in answer to your message."

The young girl's eyes were fixed upon him with a bewildering glance. Will Prentiss was not a youth given to matters of a sentimental sort. But he felt a thrill and was bound to admit that he had never seen a prettier girl in his life.

"It was my cousin sent you that message," she said with a winsome smile. "We saw our flag and felt sure that if a message was sent to its commander he would answer our call for help."

"And it seems that I came just in time."

"So you did," she replied. "My cousin and myself feel grateful to you."

"Then you are not the writer of the message?" asked Will.

"No. I am Mabel March. My cousin, Annie Clyde, wrote the note. This is the plantation of Colonel Clyde, who at present is below Richmond. He was prevented from returning by the intervention of the two armies. For aught we know he may have fallen into the hands of the Union soldiers."

"We will not anticipate such a disaster as that," said Will. "But it is plain to me that you cannot hope to remain here."

Mabel's face changed.

"Why not?" she asked in surprise and not a little of apprehension. "It would be hard to leave this place. We do not know where to go."

"But I fear you will have to, and there is not a moment to lose. We have come here at terrible risk. We managed to steal through the picket line. It is necessary for us to be gone before the next round of the picket guard——"

Her eyes dilated and her face paled.

"What?" she exclaimed. "Do you mean to say that you have no more men with you—that the Union troops are still about this place——"

"That is just what I mean," said Will. "Hence you can see the necessity of quick action."

"But—how did you dare to come here? Oh, I fear you have sacrificed your lives."

"Not yet," said Will determinedly. "If you will call your cousin——"

"I will do so at once."

"Then you will accompany us?"

"Yes, oh yes. We cannot stay here."

She glided from the room. But almost the next moment Annie Clyde entered.

The planter's daughter was scarcely less beautiful than her cousin, though of a different type. She greeted Will with modest pleasure and gratitude.

"It was a venture," she said. "I sent little Pete over with the message. I was not sure that it would be answered. Ah, it is good and kind of you to think of us, and to risk so much."

"We are glad to serve you," said Will. "But I know I need not further admonish you to hasten your preparations to leave. That is, if you care to do so."

"Oh, we cannot remain here."

"Yet I cannot say that your position will be greatly bettered by accompanying us. At the present moment our company is besieged in the little hill-top battery."

"But you are of our people. We can trust you."

"Yes," replied Will. "We shall defend you to the last. Be sure of that."

A coarse laugh escaped the lips of the prisoner, Captain Clifford.

"Very heroic," he said jeeringly. "Perhaps you won't feel quite so brave when my boys pounce on you outside."

Will made no reply. The two young women left to make their hasty preparations. It was just then that Will saw black faces at a crack in the half-shut door and heard the skurry of feet as the little negroes sped away. For an instant a fearful suspicion oppressed him.

The blacks were known to be friendly to the Yankees.

Who could say that these little eavesdroppers might not carry the tale to the Union soldiers? If they should do so the position of the little handful of Grays would be awful to contemplate.

But Will Prentiss was not a pessimist. He kept his nerve and waited.

Several minutes passed. The two young women now appeared on the scene. Each carried a bundle of effects.

"We are ready, captain," said Annie Clyde with a curtsey. Will turned to Fred and said:

"We have got to cover the same ground going back. I am going to let you and the boys go ahead with the prisoner. I will follow with the two women. Be sure and see that no one is in sight when you start."

"All right."

Captain Clifford was now gagged. He was led by the Grays out onto the porch. Here Fred carefully reconnoitured the vicinity. Not one of the foe was in sight.

There had been no outcry or alarm to show that the fate of the sentry had been discovered.

Everything looked favorable for the success of the daring plan. It would indeed be a wonderful feat to boast of if they succeeded in getting safely back to the battery.

Very cautiously Fred Randolph gave the word and all glided down from the porch. It was a short distance to the picket line.

Once there the cornfield would protect them. But even in that moment Will caught sight of a little black figure darting through the shrubbery.

Then the distant tramp of feet and clash of arms was

heard. From the direction of the parade ground came a loud shout.

In an instant into the yard there swarmed a score of the Union soldiers. They saw the Grays, and with yells of alarm started for them.

The worst had happened. They were betrayed. That the tale had been carried by the negro children Will had no doubt.

Though dismay seized him, he did not for an instant lose his nerve. For an instant he debated the best move to make.

To dash ahead for the cornfield and trust to reaching the woods and giving their pursuers the slip would have been Will's plan ordinarily.

But he knew that with the two females this would be fatal. They would surely be overtaken.

He therefore adopted the only course left, which was desperate enough.

"Back to the house," he cried.

In an instant he dragged Mabel and Annie back to the porch. The prisoner was hustled back also.

Bullets shattered the fan-lights of the door. Into the house, though, all got safely.

It was now that Annie Clyde showed her true spirit. She at once swung the great doors shut and slipped the bars into place.

"Upstairs," she cried. "Upstairs to the front room. It is heavily barred and commands the front of the house."

Up the stairs all rushed as heavy blows sounded on the front doors. The soldiers in blue had already shattered the glass of the lower windows and were surging into the lower rooms.

At the head of the stairs the Grays halted. Will left two men to hold the stairs and fire at whoever tried to ascend.

Then, with Fred and the others, he rushed into the front room. Through the windows they saw the yard below full of soldiers.

At once they opened fire. The memory of that desperate stand in the upper room of the plantation house lived long with Will Prentiss and his companions.

Meantime, while they were firing hotly through the windows, one of the Grays left in defense of the stairway was shot dead.

The other was unable to hold it alone and came staggering into the room. This left the stairway free and the foe came swarming up it.

But Will Prentiss closed the room door and placed the heavy bar across it. Just then one of the Grays reeled back and fell to the floor dead. It was a catastrophe deeply felt.

But the worst blow came the next moment, when Fred Randolph gave a sharp cry and sank half-fainting to the floor.

A bullet had penetrated his arm, and the pain and loss of blood made him sick and faint.

Will had turned to help him. But Annie Clyde and Mabel March were now bending over him and administering to his injuries.

It was a desperate moment. But it was not the time to yield to fear.

While the two girls were binding Fred Randolph's wounded arm Will Prentiss grasped a musket and sprung to aid his comrades at the window.

"We will hold out to the last," he cried.

He fired as rapidly as he could into the crowd below. But he saw that the struggle was futile.

While the shots took effect, yet the weight of numbers was so great that the end must soon come. Already heavy weights were battering on the door.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COUNTER-ATTACK.

It was hard for Will Prentiss to accept the fact that they had failed in their daring enterprise.

After carrying it so near to success it was indeed hard to be defeated now. But certainly there seemed no evading of the issue.

The door was beginning to shake and shatter. The triumphant voice of Clifford could be heard on the other side.

For the Union captain left below had been freed by his men. Will grew sick and faint at heart.

Fred, who had been bandaged effectively by the two girls, now recovered sufficiently to get upon his feet. He was much excited and wanted to resume the struggle.

But Will pressed him back, saying:

"No. The game is up, Fred, and we are bound to be captured. We have done our best."

Annie Clyde wrung her hands and cried:

"Oh, this is my fault. I am to blame for this. If you had not answered my call this would not have happened."

"If we had not answered your call, Miss Clyde," said Will, "we might have given up our lives in the redoubt over there. It is part of a soldier's life."

"You are brave and kind. Oh, is there no escape for you? You are needed for the defense of our country. Leave us and save yourselves."

"That is not possible, even had we the inclination," said the young captain.

"Ah, what is that?"

He started up and his eyes flashed, while his hearing was strained to the utmost. From the distance came a strange wild shout.

"It is the boys," cried Fred Randolph. "That is their cheer. Hurrah for the Virginia Grays! They are coming."

Will could not believe it. The Grays were left in the redoubt besieged by a thousand Union soldiers. That they would leave their position and cross the creek was out of the question.

But certainly that was a Confederate cheer. Some one was coming to their rescue. There was a lull in the attack outside, an abandoning of the assault on the door and the skurrying of feet downstairs.

The rattle of musketry was heard and then the tramp of horses' feet. Will and the rest had rushed to the window.

The Union troops were leaving the yard and falling into line at the double-quick.

It could be seen that there was urgent need of this, for far away down the lane gray uniforms could be seen. A heavy body of Confederate cavalry had appeared on the scene.

"It is Stuart," cried Fred Randolph wildly. "We are saved, Will, saved!"

The two Grays left of the five swung their caps and cheered. Joy was in the faces of all.

The Union troops had now abandoned the house entirely. From the window Will and Fred could see the engagement in the lane.

But they saw at once that the little squad of Confederate cavalry was outmatched. They would never be able to drive the Union infantry.

Already they were checked. With this realization dismay seized Will. He saw at once that the rescue was hardly likely to materialize.

The little squad of cavalry doubtless was carrying dispatches and had ventured to cross the line of the Union rear-guard. They were likely to meet with disaster if they did not use care.

With this realization Will Prentiss returned to a consideration of their own position and safety.

"Fred," he cried, "they are too weak for Clifford's men. They can never get here. They will be repulsed."

The faces of all fell. The two young women grew pale.

But Will Prentiss turned from the window.

"We must not linger here," he cried. "Let them fight it out. We must look out for our own safety."

"That is right," cried Fred. "And just now it is possible for us to escape."

This was true. Not even a guard had been left at the house.

No time was lost. Down the stairs Will led the way. Over the dead bodies of the Union men and out upon the porch they rushed.

It was but a moment's work to cross the yard and reach the cornfield. Into the corn they plunged and rapidly made their way to the sunken lane.

Progress now became more slow. But in due time, leaving the sounds of conflict behind them, they managed to gain the woods contiguous to the creek.

Yet they did not rest.

Will Prentiss knew well the necessity of reaching the creek as quickly as possible. The two girls had borne up well.

Now the water glimmered before them. Presently they emerged upon the bank and saw the Confederate flag on the opposite bluff.

Everything was as they had left it. But the boys this time did not take the trouble to take off their uniforms. The raft was still left to support the two girls and it was quickly hauled.

Into the water went Will and the two privates. Fred hung on to the end of the raft, for he could not swim easily with his wounded arm.

The girls lay prone on the raft to evade the bullets fired by the Union sentries. Several times the raft was struck.

But fortunately no one was injured, and soon the raft grounded on the sands under the bluff.

Exhausted, Will and his companions crawled out of the water. They were quite spent, but happy in the consciousness that they were safe.

It was now a question as to how the two young women were to get up the steep bluff.

But they were young and agile and were able to climb better than was expected. With assistance they finally succeeded in reaching the summit.

It is needless to say that the Grays were overjoyed at the safe return of the expedition.

Dick Walton had maintained the strictest watch of the Union forces below and no attempt had been made by them to attack the battery.

The rescue of the two young girls had been accomplished certainly in a most successful manner. They were indeed happy at the escape.

Their position in the battery, it might be said, was still one of danger. But they were safe from the evil power of Captain Clifford.

The distant sounds of the conflict between the Confederate cavalry and the Union outpost had died out.

It was evident that the cavalry squad had been repulsed.

The situation now was not at all to Will's liking. He knew that Clifford would track them to the creek and might even form a junction with the forces of Colonel Greene.

At any moment other fragments of the Union rear-guard might come up and attack the little battery in overwhelming force.

But there seemed no escape. The Grays were surrounded and besieged. The day was wearing away.

Far to the north the sullen boom of guns was heard. It taught Will that some heavy fighting was going on up there.

It chafed him to reflect that no doubt this was Magruder's attack, and he was waiting to hear Jackson's guns on the other side of the Union column.

But Jackson had not received the dispatches which Will yet held in his safekeeping. It did not look as if they would even be delivered.

In vain the young captain tried to figure out some desperate plan to break the besieging line and get away.

It was not pleasant to reflect that he was held up thus, while there was the most urgent of reasons for his getting through to intercept Jackson.

"It's hard luck, Will," said Fred, whose wounded arm was in a sling. "We are all tied up here."

"Yes," agreed the young captain. "I would give much to know of some plan for getting away."

"I see no chance."

"Nor I."

"But I do."

A voice sounded at Will's elbow. Both young officers turned. Corporal Sam Payton stood before them. There was an earnestness in his manner.

"Pardon me, captain," he said, "but I couldn't help overhearing what you said and it interested me. I know of a way to get out of this predicament."

Will and Fred stared.

"What is it?"

"Just this! You want those dispatches to reach Jackson, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you'll give them to me and give Spotswood and myself ticket of leave, we will carry those dispatches through. Jackson's nearest column can't be five miles away. Once we get clear we can reach there in less than two hours. Before the day is over we can be back here with two regiments to drive in the rear-guard and raise this siege."

It was a startling proposition. The two young officers wondered that they had not thought of it before.

"Payton," said Will, "do you really believe you could get through?"

"I know it."

"How will you get through the line which is below us at present?"

"How did you get through when you went over to the Clyde plantation?"

"By swimming the creek."

"Yes."

Will exchanged glances with Fred. If the dispatches were delivered to Jackson safely half the object of their expedition would be fulfilled.

Will believed that it was feasible. He felt that he could do the trick himself. There was no reason why Payton should not.

He could not leave the Grays in their present predicament to do this. But Payton could.

With Will it was easy to reach a quick decision.

"Payton," he said sharply, "much depends on you. I hope you will do your best."

The corporal's eyes flashed.

"You will let us go?"

"You want Spotswood for a companion?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well, we are friends. Then he is a good man in the bush. We must fool the Union pickets, you know."

"Right. Call Spotswood and I will give you the dispatches and instructions. Lose no time."

Payton darted away. Will looked at Fred and said:

"I wish it was me."

"So do I," said Fred. "It is our best and last resort, Will."

Quickly Payton and Spotswood made ready for the expedition. They were objects of envy to the other members of the company.

Will gave them duplicates of dispatches and careful instructions. Then they took their leave. Down the bluff they slid to the water's edge.

A moment more and they were in the current. They ran the gauntlet of the fire of the Union sentries successfully and crawled out on the other shore.

They waved a farewell to the defenders of the battery and then plunged into the forest.

"May they have luck," said Fred. "All depends upon them."

"That is true," said Will. "I fear the possibility of a night attack."

"Hello! What's that?"

"Where?"

"Look yonder, down the creek."

An interesting spectacle was beheld. Into the current far down the creek a hastily constructed raft was seen to float.

On it were a dozen Union soldiers. The raft crossed and returned. Others were ferried over.

All was now plain.

"What do you think of that?" cried Fred. "They're going to stop our little game of crossing the creek at will. They mean to draw the line completely about us."

"It will weaken the rest of the line."

"They don't care. They have men enough."

This was certainly true. In fact, hardly half an hour had elapsed before Union troops were seen on the opposite bank of the creek.

Certainly Payton and Spotswood had started just in time. Escape now was utterly cut off.

Also another startling fact became apparent.

From the woods there advanced a familiar figure. It was that of a Union officer, and he shook his fist at the besieged battery.

"Who the deuce is that?" asked Fred, straining his gaze.

"Is it possible you don't recognize him?" rejoined Will.

"Captain Clifford."

"The same."

"Great guns. He has come over to unite with Greene. How he'd like to get at us, wouldn't he?"

"I should say he would—yes, look at the swarm of them in the woods. It seems to me they are well within range. Let us give them a few shells as a hint to keep back."

"A jolly good idea!"

One of the guns was trained on the opposite shore. A shell went hissing down into the forest.

It exploded with terrific force. Another and another was sent. The men in blue could be seen running in all directions.

"Give it to them," cried Will. "Scatter them if you can."

But in a short time the Union troops had withdrawn out of danger.

But now a surprise was in order. There was a movement along Colonel Greene's line.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LAST ATTACK.

Jackson would not fail to send a relief to the Grays. A march of five miles ought to bring them up easily before the day was spent.

A mounted orderly was seen to ride up from the Savage's Station road. It was directly after this that the general movement was noticed.

"They are forming," cried Fred. "Do you think they can possibly meditate another attack?"

Will studied the situation critically. A startling truth burst upon him.

"Fred," he cried, "the crisis is at hand. That is just what they are going to do."

It was a thrilling fact. But one explanation was vouchsafed.

This was that orders had been received for Greene's regiment to fall back with the rest of the rear-guard. They were going to make one last attempt to overwhelm the Grays before doing so.

Will Prentiss drew a deep breath and set his jaws hard.

He gave quick orders that sent his men to the guns. All was on the *qui vive*.

The two brave Southern girls, Mabel and Annie, were pale but calm. As Will passed them he touched his hat and said:

"I trust you will not be frightened. We are about to be attacked by the foe. We hope to repulse them."

"Our prayers are with you," said Annie. "Can we not do something to assist?"

"I can shoot with a rifle," said Miss March. "I am a good shot."

"Shooting men is not like shooting rabbits," said Will. "I am afraid you would lose your nerve."

He hurried away laughingly. The two girls, however, did not show fear. They went to the parapet and looked over with interest.

Annie even picked up a musket and rested the barrel over the mound of earth. But just at that moment bullets came skimming over the face of the breastwork, throwing up the dirt.

It drove her back and she was pleased to remain in the background thereafter, though both girls did valiant work as nurses later on.

Up the hillside now the Union line began to move.

It was one last supreme effort of Greene to carry the battery. If the Grays could repulse them this once all would be well.

It was a thrilling thing to lean over the breastwork and watch this blue line coming up to the attack, while the bullets whizzed about one's ears.

It required nerve and courage. But the Grays had been in many fights and this was not the time for them to waver.

"Steady, Grays," called Will as he stood among them, musket in hand; "wait for the word."

Several moments elapsed. It seemed an eternity.

Then came the quick sharp command:

"Attention, Grays! Ready! Fire!"

The muskets rattled and the storm of bullets staggered the Union line. Then the whole six cannon trained on that side of the hill poured forth their fearful contents in one awful storm of death.

Great columns of smoke rolled down the hillside. The awful sleet of shrapnel tore into the blue line with frightful force.

The line reeled. Heaps of dead and wounded lay on the slope. It was an awful storm of death to face.

Like lightning worked the boy gunners. The cannon were quickly swabbed and reloaded. The smoke partly hid the line of bayonets below. But it could be seen that they were reforming.

Will saw that they were dangerously close. All depended upon this volley.

Once again the guns belched. The Grays kept up a steady fire with their muskets. Slowly the smoke rolled up from the hillside.

The blue line was no longer there. It had melted, and in confusion had been swept back to the bottom of the hill.

Greene should have been satisfied now, if ever.

He could not storm the hill in the face of the deadly guns. What the Grays, only one-tenth of their number, had accomplished in one wild dash, they had failed to gain.

Slowly and sullenly the Union line retreated. It had been badly decimated by this last repulse.

Over one hundred dead and dying lay on the hillside. A dozen of the Grays had been killed. In proportion their loss had been as great.

But now a new danger threatened.

A shell exploded on the parapet of the little fort and made a deep breach in the works, as well as blew into eternity two more of the little company.

Another shell exploded overhead. Another struck the breastwork, but failed to explode.

Will, aghast, turned his glass in the direction of a distant eminence. He could see only the muzzles of the four guns of Greene's artillery.

At once with quick orders, the six cannon of the hilltop battery, were trained upon the distant foe. Then a deadly artillery duel followed.

Greene's men, however, had not effectually succeeded in getting the range of the Grays' position.

Most of their shells were too high or fell short. The Grays' gunners, however, plumped shells with unerring skill down upon the little eminence where their foe was.

There was a terrific roar and one of the Union guns was seen to fly in the air.

"That's it, boys," cried Will. "Give them another. There's only three of their guns left."

With a cheer the boys responded and worked like Trojans at the guns. The fire of the Union battery grew weaker.

Finally it was completely silenced. The duel was over.

Another surprising fact became apparent. Below the Union line was seen to be breaking up and withdrawing.

"Hurrah!" cried Fred. "They're raising the siege!"

"They've given it up. We win!"

A rousing cheer went up from the Grays. It was answered defiantly from the Union troops below.

It was plain that Greene was preparing to abandon his position. The troops on the other side of the creek were recrossing as rapidly as possible.

It looked as if victory had sided with the Grays. The effect upon Mabel and Annie was thrilling. They were much delighted.

They had proved angels of mercy to the wounded and dying soldiers though, and they kept up the good work until there was no more to do.

CHAPTER X.

A HAPPY MEETING.

Greene's column, shattered and badly demoralized, continued to fall back and soon was a mile distant and debouching upon the highway leading to Malvern.

The Grays were not so unwise as to risk abandoning their position yet.

There was need of caution, for it was by no means certain that they would not walk into a trap. Yet from the battery a wide view of the country could be had, and no sign of a foe was visible in any other direction.

It seemed certain that Clifford and his company had departed with Greene. There was therefore nothing more to fear from him.

Will now approached the two young girls and asked:

"Now that all is over, and it is likely that this part of the country is free from the foe, what will you do? Will you continue with us?"

"No," replied Miss Clyde with her winsome smile. "If you think it is safe, we will return to the plantation."

"I see no reason why it will not be safe," said Will. "With Greene's departure, the dead-line so far as this vicinity is concerned, is obliterated and the Union rear-guard pressed on."

"We are very thankful to you, Captain Prentiss," said Mabel March. "We feel we owe you much."

"Certainly I am pleased to have done you the service," said Will. "I only wish it were a greater one."

Annie Clyde blushed and averted her gaze. Will's eyes had been fixed upon her. The boy-captain thought he had never seen a more charming young woman.

He could see how easy it would be to fall in love with her on the spot.

It seemed as if Mabel divined his thoughts, for with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes she said:

"Now, you must not say nice things to my cousin. Her heart has long been another's."

Will gave a start and a little laugh.

"Lucky man," he said. "He certainly has gained a treasure."

Annie's face was scarlet.

"Now Mabel, you should not say such things about me," she protested. "I think you are real mean."

"Indeed, the story is safe with me," laughed Will. "But from curiosity, is he worthy? Is he handsome? Dark or fair? You'll tell me, Miss March?"

"Mabel—you——"

"Yes, I'll tell you," cried Mabel eagerly. "He is both worthy and handsome. His name is Chester Martin. He is at present lieutenant in Stuart's cavalry."

"What?" cried Will. "I know Lieutenant Martin right well. He is a royal good fellow and a brave soldier."

Annie gave him a shy glance of pleasure.

"You are right; he is all that," cried Fred Randolph, who had just come up. "And were you aware of one fact, my dear young ladies?"

"What?" asked Mabel.

"Just this; the young commander of that squad of cavalry that attacked Clifford's men just in time to give us a chance to escape is no other than Lieutenant Chester Martin."

A cry of surprise and delight pealed from Mabel's lips. Annie Clyde at once straightened up eagerly.

"Is that true?" she asked.

"On my word of honor," replied Fred.

"I thank you for giving me the information. I own that lieutenant is a friend of mine, and I am glad to hear from him."

"I'll wager he was coming to the plantation to see you, Annie," cried Mabel. "Isn't it horrid that Clifford and his men were there?"

"Or anybody else," laughed Will.

"Oh, no," spoke up Annie quickly. "You are of our people, Captain Prentiss. You are always welcome to the Clyde plantation."

Will lifted his hat.

"Thank you, Miss Clyde. I trust I may some day visit you there."

"It's more than likely that you will see young Martin soon," said Fred. "He and his men were beaten back by Clifford, but they will no doubt return."

Will now hurried away to watch the evolutions of Greene's retreating force. He was satisfied now that the retreat was bona fide.

The horizon was clear and there seemed no reason why they should tarry longer at the present spot.

The battery and the guns might be of value, but Will could not afford to leave a guard. It was better to abandon them.

The Union troops had taken away their wounded. The dead yet lay on the hillside, and Will's first order was to have them buried.

Then the members of the little company who had lost their lives were buried in the redoubt with appropriate services. Salutes were fired over their graves and a sad farewell taken.

Will had decided to cross the creek and take a road leading north from the plantation.

This he believed would enable him by forced marching to hit Jackson's column before two hours. This would give him time to deliver the dispatches.

The young captain's spirit was now at its highest. He was high now.

They had followed him down the plantation and started on a march to the Clyde plantation.

Annie and Mabel were carried across the creek by a couple of the soldiers. They were girls of athletic tendencies and had no trouble in keeping pace with the boys on the march.

It was not long before they came in sight of the plantation house. A troop of negroes came running out to meet them.

The house had been badly shattered by the fight between the little detachment of Grays and Clifford's men.

Many of the windows had been shot out and the doors smashed. Yet the negro servants were in their places and the two girls decided to remain.

Will could hardly spare a guard, and he said:

"I think you will be safe unless Clifford takes it into his head to come back this way."

"We shall post negro pickets," said Annie resolutely. "If he is seen coming we will find a safe hiding place."

"I can see that you have resources," said Will. "I wish you a long and happy life."

"And a good husband," cried the mischievous Mabel. "Land of goodness! Here he is now!"

There was a clatter of horses' hoofs and into the yard dashed a score of mounted troopers. They wore the gray, so Will's men made no demonstration.

At their head rode a tall, handsome youth. He sprang from his horse and bounded upon the porch, and before anyone could speak or act he had clasped Annie Clyde in his arms.

"Heaven is kind," he said. "I thought you were lost to me."

Blushing furiously, she pushed him back and said:

"You forget; there are others here!"

"Hang the others!" cried the dashing young cavalryman. Then a sharp cry escaped him.

"Prentiss! Is it you? Do I owe all this happiness to you?"

"You do," cried Mabel March. "He is a real hero, too, Chester Martin."

Chester grasped Will's hand and wrung it.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you," he cried. "I feel that I can never repay you. I tried to whip Clifford, but we had not men enough."

"Martin," said Will, "I am more than glad to see you. Are you detached from Stuart's corps now?"

"Yes," replied the young cavalryman. "We are scouting on the rear of the enemy's line. I have been carte blanche."

"Will you keep a couple of miles from me?"

"Certainly!"

"Hover about this vicinity for a while. I think Clifford is sure to return. He won't come in force, but he is apt to ride back with a detachment, and if he does there will be a chance to capture him."

"Thank you very much."

"Good-bye," said Will. "But may I ask you a question?"

"Yes. I am anxious to get through and deliver dispatches to General Jackson. I must not delay here."

"One moment, Prentiss." The young cavalryman put a hand on Will's arm. There was an eager light in his eyes. "I have a plan for you."

Will gave a start of surprise.

"What is it?"

"You want to overtake Jackson?"

"Yes."

"He was expected to hit the Union column to-day in conjunction with Magruder. But he will hardly do it. Now, if you go ahead on foot, you will hardly overtake him to-day, for he will march as fast as you. I have a suggestion."

Will looked his surprise.

"Well?"

"I have a small troop, to be sure. Yet our horses number thirty. I want to remain here for a few hours. Yes, even until to-morrow. You may have my horses to mount a detachment of your men. The rest of your company may co-operate with me in the defense of this plantation till you return. What do you say? Is it a bargain?"

For a moment Will was thrilled with such joy that he could not speak. Then he cried:

"Martin, do you mean that? Will you do me that kindness?"

"Of course."

"Hurrah!" cried Will. "We shall win after all. The dispatches shall be in General Jackson's hands within an hour. I will return your horses safely, my good friend Martin, and do as much for you at some later time."

"The pleasure is all mine," said Martin gayly, as he bowed before his sweetheart. "Can't you see my game?"

Everybody laughed. There was an easy nonchalance about Chester Martin which won everybody's liking.

The plan proposed by Martin suited Will Prentiss well. He was eager to put it into execution.

At once he selected thirty of his men to mount the horses. The remainder of the company was left with the second lieutenant, Dick Walton, in command.

It was but a brief while later that the little detachment of Grays rode out of the yard. They headed at once to the north.

Will's hopes were now based upon the seemingly well-grounded assurance that they were now outside the dead-line, and therefore had no need to fear from the Union rear-guard.

How he was mistaken the incidents to follow will show.

CHAPTER XI.

JACKSON'S COLUMN.

The withdrawal of Greene and his force from before the redoubt was explained to Will in after days. It seemed that he had received orders to march north and co-operate with another regiment. In the meantime a passing column which had come up from Richmond.

No other motive had led Greene to give up the siege.

He had certainly withdrawn with most extreme reluctance. It had been his keen desire to carry the hill-top battery.

But he had been compelled to abandon the game. It is needless to say that it was a sore matter to him, for he was thirsting for a chance to even matters with the Grays.

With him had marched Clifford and his company. But the wily captain had no idea of remaining a component part of Greene's regiment.

His was an independent company. Therefore he felt free to withdraw it and pursue a different course.

This was not in an opposite direction from the Clyde plantation. In fact, when he had made a detour march of five or six miles he had turned and bent his course straight for Clyde's.

Clifford had no intention of giving up his game to capture sweet Annie Clyde for his wife. Incidentally he hoped to surprise and exterminate the Grays.

Of all this Will Prentiss had not an inkling as he rode away with his men. If he had he would not have departed.

But he did not feel sure that the duplicates of the dispatches which he had given Spotswood and Payton would ever reach Jackson.

Moreover he believed he could get there before them in the saddle. In any event, now that the opportunity offered he wanted to report to Jackson in person.

He knew from the points given him by Martin that Payton and Spotswood would hit Jackson's line almost in the rear.

This would mean a hard effort to overtake the main column, with which it was to be assumed Jackson was. It meant fatal delay.

So on dashed the little mounted company. Will and Fred rode in advance.

They did not proceed with the caution they might have displayed had they not been convinced that the rear-guard had drawn in its line.

Across fields, over fences, through patches of woods they rode rapidly. Not a sign of an armed body of men was to be seen for some time.

Then the first startling incident occurred. The little cavalcade was turning a bend in a narrow road which was hidden by a thick growth of bushes.

The road led down to a little run through which trickled a stream of water.

At this fordway there was grouped a troop of United States cavalymen. They outnumbered Will's troop five to one.

The Union riders had not been looking for a foe, so they were evidently as much surprised as Will and his boys.

There was for a moment a wild scramble by both sides. The Union troopers, not knowing the strength of the Grays, and assuming that this might only be a detachment of a larger force, deployed instantly on both sides of the road.

The plunging horses, urged by their excited riders, raised a cloud of dust and this favored the little detachment of Confederates.

Before the dust had settled Will and his boys were galloping like mad in an attempt to ride around the foe.

They crossed the fields and leaped the ditches and had almost accomplished their purpose when the true state of affairs was discovered by the foe.

Instantly, with a wild yell, the Union cavalymen set sail in pursuit. The chase that followed was exciting.

For over a mile it was nip and tuck. Then Fred, looking back, said:

"They are gaining on us!"

Bullets were also flying thick and fast. At any moment someone might go down.

It seemed a miracle that none had as yet been hit.

On and on went the mad chase. It was not long before Will saw that they must kill their horses or make a desperate stand.

Against such odds this could have but one result. The young captain was filled with dismay.

It seemed hard indeed, now that the game was within their reach, to be compelled to surrender and lose all. Will was desperate.

But just at that moment, and while it seemed to him that his horse must fall, they topped a rise in the narrow road.

The sight which burst upon their gaze was thrilling. A line of gray extended as far as the eye could reach, a long column winding down across the country.

A wild cheer went up from the throats of the little troop.

"Jackson! Jackson! Hurrah for Stonewall! Hurrah for the Confederacy!"

Down they went, their horses seeming to gain new speed and strength. The Union pursuers fell back.

The Grays pulled rein now and allowed their over-ridden steeds to breathe. It had been an awful tax upon them.

The columns of Jackson presented indeed a fine appearance, and the boys felt a wild thrill of joy as they realized that the enterprise was a success and that they had carried it through all right.

"Hurrah for Jackson!"

The cheer reached the hearing of the infantry lines. They answered, and as the Grays rode along to the head of the column Will saw a squad of officers.

There in the midst of them he recognized the famous Stonewall Jackson. The great general was busy with the details of the march.

As the little detachment rode up he glanced carelessly at it. But Will spurred his horse nearer and cried:

"General Jackson, dispatches for you from General Magruder."

Jackson turned in an instant.

"From Magruder," he cried. "Who are you?"

"Captain Will Prentiss, of the Virginia Grays."

"The deuce you are! Where did you come from?"

"From General Magruder's headquarters."

"Eh? The Union army is between us and Magruder at this moment."

"I know it, sir."

"How did you get here then?"

"We came through their rear-guard."

Jackson stared at the young captain.

"What? Through McClellan's dead-line? I can't believe you, sir!"

"Nevertheless it is true," replied Will. "We were besieged for hours, and only fought the foe back by capturing a battery and turning their own guns upon them. We are lucky to get here, sir."

"By my soul, I should say you are," agreed Jackson. "You didn't do all that with this handful of men?"

"Oh, no. Part of my company are behind at the Clyde plantation. I secured these horses and rode on to deliver you the dispatches."

"You have done well, Captain Prentiss. Magruder ought to be proud of you. What does he want?"

"The dispatches will tell you, sir."

General Jackson proceeded to read Magruder's message. He read it slowly and then frowned.

"Unless Magruder can march faster than I can, he won't hit the Union line to-day," he said. "We have encountered Franklin's corps at the White Oak Bridge, and he is giving us no end of trouble. I can't co-operate with Magruder until we've crossed the creek and driven Franklin back."

"Shall I report to him in such a manner, sir?"

"Yes. Tell him that verbatim. I don't believe we can hitch horses before to-morrow. Then we will all get together for a concerted blow at the Yankee army."

"If well delivered it ought to end the war."

"It will," said General Jackson confidently. "Ride to the rear, Captain Prentiss, and order forage for your horses. You look well-spent."

Will saluted and turned back to his men. He knew well enough that the horses did need food and rest, and he was not loath to accept General Jackson's order.

So Will and his troop rode to the rear, where they secured feed for the horses and rations for themselves.

Regiments were hurrying forward to take part in the action at the bridge which crossed the White Oak Creek.

Will watched them pass at the double-quick with a thrill.

He would have joined them and gone to the front at once if he had had his whole company. But the small detachment he had would be of little avail.

So he decided to go back and join his comrades at the Clyde plantation. From there he decided to listen back to the main body of the army, which was now closely pressing the Union retreat.

Will knew that the Union troops were bound to make a stand somewhere before long.

Then a desperate battle must be fought. To take an active part in that battle was his determination.

An hour was spent in resting and feeding the horses. Then the Grays once more mounted.

They rode away from the marching columns of Jackson's army. Soon they were beyond the line of scouts and cutting across country toward the Clyde plantation.

The day was waning.

The sun was going down in the western heavens rapidly.

It seemed an age before the five miles were covered and the little troop rode into a lane leading to the Clyde plantation.

Then Fred rose in his stirrups.

"Hello!" he cried. "What the deuce is that?"

The question went from lip to lip. All eyes were fixed upon a surprising spectacle.

This was a pyramid of smoke which seemed to rise above the tree tops from the spot where Clyde Hall should be. A strange misgiving seized upon Will.

"It is fire," he said.

"Fire," repeated Fred. "Ought we not to see the upper stories of the hall from here, Will?"

"Yes."

The two young officers looked at each other. Then, without another word, they spurred their horses on.

The little cavalcade cleared the trees, topped a rise and saw that before them which gave all a thrill.

Where Clyde Hall had stood was a smoking pile of ruins. Smoke rose in a huge pyramid.

No sign of living being was about the place. The Grays drew rein in the yard.

There were visible upon all hands the signs of a desperate and deadly struggle to the death.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEED OF A VILLAIN.

It was an appalling sight which palled upon the gaze of the Grays.

Dead bodies were scattered about, some in uniforms of blue, some in gray. No living being was in the vicinity.

Even the negroes had fled. Nothing was left but smoke and ruins.

"What do you make of it, Will?" asked Fred.

"There is only one conclusion. There has been a battle. No doubt that villain Clifford returned."

"But we do not know who was victor?"

"No. But from the destruction of the house it is easy enough to deduce that it was Clifford's men. They must have fired it."

"But our boys——"

"That remains to be discovered," and Will shrugged his shoulders. "I can hardly believe that they would retreat without a battle."

"Nor I. Be sure they made a fine stand before surrendering."

"There must have been heavy odds against them."

"That is true."

"Well, we must now find out what is the solution of the mystery. If our boys were here it is odd where they have gone. Oh, who is this?"

Suddenly on the scene there appeared a startling revelation. Two men, looking more like tramps than aught else, appeared on the scene. Their clothes were in ribbons and

their faces were blotched and bloated with heat and poisonous plants found in swamps.

"Captain Will," said one of them, staggering forward; "well, we're glad to get back."

"Sam Payton," cried Will with amazement. "Where did you come from, Sam? What's happened to you? And Joe Spotswood, too. You don't mean to say that you failed to get those dispatches to General Jackson?"

"We got 'em there, captain," said Payton with a weak yawn, "but we were jest too late."

"Too late?"

"Yes, you had been there. In spite of our mighty efforts, you turned the trick. Ah, well, it's just as well."

"But you must have had hard experiences. You look played out."

"We are so, but still fit as a fiddle when the right time comes. We are glad to get back and did the best we could."

"Which is quite good enough," cried Will. "You shall have honorable mention. Are you able to fall in?"

The two boys quickly fell into the line. They were fully as disturbed as the others that the plantation house had been burned.

"It's the work of that scoundrel Clifford," cried Sam Payton. "He must be rounded up and punished. There is no other course."

"He shall be punished when he is caught," said Will positively, "but we must find the rest of our boys. I don't see where they are?"

Search of the vicinity revealed no clew. The seventy odd members of the Virginia Grays had disappeared most mysteriously.

Will was completely puzzled. He tried in vain to get a clew. Finally he said:

"This is getting upon my nerves. I don't understand why there is not some trace of the Grays here. It is very strange. And the two young girls are, of course, in the hands of the villain."

"What of Lieutenant Martin?" asked Fred. "With his cavalymen there ought to have been force enough to hold the force of Clifford at bay."

Will proceeded to make a thorough investigation. The result was that an explanation was soon found.

Scouts were sent out to scour the vicinity. They found a trail leading to the north which would seem to indicate that the Grays or a body of men their equal numerically had gone in that direction.

Another trail leading south showed that another and larger force had gone that way.

A faint clew was found. On a bush far down the highway was found a bit of white veil. This had belonged to Annie Clyde.

Thus step by step the clews were traced until finally a startling deduction was reached by Will.

"I can see only one explanation," he said to Fred. "It looks as if the Grays had left the place and marched north. Another body of troops, perhaps Clifford's, have marched south."

"But what of Martin and his cavalymen? Also, why should our boys leave here at all?"

Will scratched his head.

"I must say you have got me," he said. "It beats any thing."

"Certainly it is a puzzle."

But just then a cry went up. Into the plantation yard there walked a small squad of the Grays.

They carried a wounded man between them. By his uniform Will saw at once that he was Preston, one of Martin's cavalry boys.

In an instant the boy captain rushed forward. The wounded man fixed his fevered gaze upon him.

"Well," he said in a husky voice, "I'm glad to see you, Captain Prentiss. You have come back at last."

"I have come back to find a most surprising state of things," said Will. "What has happened?"

"It is the work of that villain Clifford," replied Preston.

"Clifford? Has he been here?"

"Yes."

"Where is Martin and the rest of your comrades?"

"They are prisoners all in his hands. He has marched away southward with all of them. The two young women are captives also. We made an awful fight, but he had too many men for us."

Will's face was hard and set.

"But the Virginia Grays—what of them?" he asked.

Preston opened his eyes wide.

"Don't you know?" he asked. "Didn't you send for them?"

"Send for them?" gasped Will. "What do you mean?"

Preston raised himself on his elbow and stared at Will.

"I thought it was a skin game at the time," he exclaimed.

"A messenger came with an order from you; he was a negro, and the order was that the Grays should at once march north to join you. Lieutenant Walton at once obeyed the order. That left Clyde Hall defended only by our handful of cavalymen. The Grays had not been gone an hour when down swooped Clifford. We fought until nearly every man was down. Lieutenant Martin was overpowered. I crept into the bushes shot in three places. I could see all that was going on.

"Clifford set fire to the buildings. He then stood the rest of our boys up in line and shot them like dogs. Oh, I gnashed my teeth in fury! But I was helpless. The two girls were placed on horses and taken away. They also took Martin away as prisoner. Oh, it was awful! If the Grays had only been here."

Will set his teeth hard.

"How many men do you think that Clifford had with him?"

"About one hundred and fifty."

"Were they regular United States infantry?"

"Some of them were. The majority, however, looked like bushwhackers and guerrillas that he had picked up, men willing to do anything."

"I need only say that it was a treacherous and cowardly

subterfuge on the part of Clifford," said Will. "He shall hang for it."

But for once in his life Will Prentiss was stumped. He was at a loss to know how to retrieve this great disaster.

The Grays no doubt were far on their way to Jackson's line. To send for them to return would be a loss of time which would prevent the overtaking of the villain and his crew.

The young captain knew that to pursue them with his present force would be almost suicidal. He would in his turn be wiped out.

What could he do?

He paced up and down a moment in deep reflection. Fred Randolph had walked to a little eminence near. He had detected a distant comprehensive sound.

It was the muffled roar of a battle. He saw the distant columns of powder smoke rising above the trees.

He watched it for some moments and then became convinced that it was approaching.

The distant conflict was to the southward. It was evident that the contest was between some outlying column of McClellan's rear-guard and perhaps a scouting or cavalry column of the Confederates.

It certainly could be no part of Magruder's or Jackson's divisions, for they were long since past this point on their way in hot pursuit of McClellan's main army.

Fred listened with interest to the distant sounds of conflict and became more than ever satisfied that the Union rear-guard, if such it was, was being driven.

He experienced a thrill as he reflected that if the Grays were only present how easy it would be to head off the Union column and perhaps force it to surrender.

He turned and saw Will walking toward him. The young captain was in a gloomy state of mind.

But Fred pointed to the south and said:

"There is something going on down there, Will. I reckon it is some part of the Union rear-guard that has run up against a detachment of ours."

Will Prentiss gave a great start. He looked down the highway and then back at the ruins.

A sudden light broke over his face.

"I say, Fred, what do you think? You know Clifford and his men went in that direction? Do you suppose he ran against some of our troops?"

"Clifford!" gasped Fred. "That is the whole story. By jingo! the wheel is turning, Will; he is sure to be defeated."

It seemed not only logical, but a practical certainty. At once Will proceeded to form his small detachment in line.

They mounted and now rode slowly and cautiously down the road toward the scene of conflict, which was rapidly drawing nearer.

The sounds of battle were growing louder and it was plain that they must soon be in sight of the contestants.

In fact, before long straggling lines of blue were seen emerging from the woods and streaming into the road.

It was plain that the Union detachment was being driven.

Will now drew his men off at an angle to avoid a conflict with the foe.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LIVELY CHASE.

It was the purpose of Will Prentiss to first see what was the strength of the retreating column of blue and to ascertain if it was really the detachment of Clifford before joining in the contest.

So he rode to a little height of land nearby, from which he could have a fair view of the scene.

Now he saw the lines of gray about a mile away advancing across the fields and firing heavy volleys.

The blue company he saw at once was Clifford's.

The boy captain was thrilled with great excitement.

He looked for some sign of the prisoners. But he could see nothing of them or of Clifford.

The Confederate force was vastly superior to Clifford's. In fact, they were extending by each wing to completely envelop the Union troops.

So that when Will Prentiss and his small detachment suddenly made a dash in the rear of their column they were demoralized, and by dozens threw down their arms and surrendered.

The Confederate troops closed in on the double-quick, and in a short time the whole Union command were prisoners.

Will greeted the Confederate colonel, whose name was Winton.

"I have just come up from Richmond," he said. "I was ordered to join Magruder, but on the march hither ran into this company of Yankees marching right toward us. It was a surprise to me, for I thought the Yankees were in retreat."

"So they are," said Will. "But the dark scoundrel who is in command of this troop was trying to get away from even his own army."

Colonel Winton looked surprised.

"How is that?" he asked.

Will then told him the whole story of the villainy of Clifford and of the burning of Clyde Hall.

Winton listened with horror.

"That was infamous!" he cried. "If he is among the prisoners I shall hold an interview with him."

"He is not," said Will. "I have looked for him in vain."

"But the young women whom he took away with him——"

"They have disappeared with him. It must be that as soon as he met your men and saw that he was defeated that he decamped with the prisoners."

But at this moment Fred Randolph dashed up excitedly.

"Will," he cried, "the scoundrel has skipped out with the two girls. But I have found Lieutenant Martin, who is going to start in pursuit."

"Colonel Winton," said Will, "I hope we shall catch the scoundrel. We shall at once start on his trail."

"And I hope you succeed," said Winton. "Do you need my assistance?"

"I think not, as he is not now backed by a force of men."

He had doubtless selected a handful of his most trusted followers, and as he carried a few horses with him they have mounted and rode away, leaving the troops to their fate."

This was quickly verified by men of Clifford's troop. Their opinion of his dastardly conduct in deserting them was not of the best.

But Will and Fred now lost no time. They shook hands with Winton.

"I hear that Jackson is driving the Yankees at Frazier's farm," said Winton. "I had hoped to join the main column before dark. But the sun is already down."

This was true. The shades of twilight were beginning to darken the landscape.

"To-morrow will see the Union troops driven back to the James," said Will. "Victory is sure to side with the Confederacy."

"I hope so."

"I feel sure of it."

"I wish you luck, captain."

"Thank you, colonel."

"I am going to send these prisoners back to Richmond with a detachment of my men. Then I shall push on and hope to join our main army in the morning."

"I may see you to-morrow," said Will. "We shall try to rescue the two captive young women. If we succeed we shall rejoin our company and join Jackson's column, if possible, before midnight."

"I wish you success."

Will and his little detachment galloped away. Beside him rode young Lieutenant Martin, who was hardly able to sit in the saddle from his wounds. As they rode on he told Will the whole story of the fearful affair at Clyde Hall.

His face was white and set, and he said tensely:

"If harm comes to those whom he has so villainously abducted, the world will not be wide enough to hold him from my vengeance."

"He is certainly a scoundrel," said Will. "But he shall get his pay if we catch him."

The pursuers had little to guide them beyond the information given them by members of Clifford's troop who had seen him ride away.

He had taken a northwesterly course toward the Mechanicsville road, and there was no doubt that this was his objective point.

But it was likely that his purpose was to seek retreat in the swamps and woods until he could with safety make his way north again.

On rode the little detachment of Grays. The twilight was deepening when suddenly they heard the sounds of firing ahead.

A distant volley of pistol shots was heard. Then down the road toward them came a riderless horse.

The animal diverged from the road, and leaping the fence vanished in the gloom. Will Prentiss rose in his stirrups and cried: "Something is up ahead there. Forward!"

The little detachment put spurs to their horses and rode ahead. In a few moments they turned a bend in the road and saw a confused struggling mass of men and horses ahead.

Then down the road toward them came a half-dozen riders. They would have dashed past, but the Grays reined across the road and Will shouted: "Halt!"

Loud imprecations rose on the air and Will recognized the voice at once. It was that of Clifford.

The young captain saw a troop of horse directly behind, and which now came up and enveloped them. Clifford and his party were captured.

Will Prentiss in another moment was shaking hands with a young Confederate lieutenant of cavalry who had been under orders to patrol the road for Union fugitives.

It was a precaution employed by the Richmond authorities to have all the roads between the capital and the field of battle carefully patrolled.

The result was the capture of Clifford and his gang, as we have seen.

Lieutenant Carter, of the Richmond Light Horse, eagerly greeted Will and his companions.

"I am pleased to meet the captain of the Virginia Grays," he said. "Your fame is known to me."

"The pleasure is mutual, Lieutenant Carter," said Will.

"And, Lieutenant Martin, I am glad to meet you," said Carter. But Martin had pressed forward to where the female figures sat each on a horse, in the midst of the captured party.

The meeting between Martin and his sweetheart was a joyful one. When it was known to Carter and his men how matters were they were interested and sympathetic.

"Have no fear," said Lieutenant Carter. "I shall take the Union abductor down to Richmond, and we will see that he does not attempt to abduct any more Virginia girls right away."

Martin wanted to settle the score with Clifford personally, but Annie Clyde drew him away, saying:

"He can do us no further harm, Chester. Let him live and expiate his crimes. He will trouble us no more."

"But he should hang!" gritted Lieutenant Martin. "He has destroyed your home and nearly spoiled my life's happiness. There is no fate too harsh for such a villain."

"Yes, there is," disputed the young Southern girl. "Death is too simple and brief a punishment. Remorse and disap-

pointment can only be inflicted in life. Let him live and suffer."

"The young woman is right, Martin," said Carter. "We shall see that he does not escape. The Richmond prison will hold him until after the war."

So Clifford, trembling with abject fear and cowardice, was led away in charge of a guard. He never again crossed the lives of the characters of this story.

It was now a question as to what was the best move to make by all. Will Prentiss felt that his mission was ended so far as the rescue of the two girls was concerned. Duty bade him to at once return to his company, which was doubtless ere this with Jackson's column.

Lieutenant Martin's squad had been totally wiped out. It was necessary for him to report to General Stuart as soon as possible.

As for Clifford, he was soon on his way to Richmond.

The two young women, Annie Clyde and Mabel March, had decided to go to Richmond also, where they would rejoin Colonel Clyde. The burning of Clyde Hall prevented their resuming home life there, so there was no alternative.

Lieutenant Carter kindly furnished them an escort. They rode away, after bidding all farewell. Lieutenant Martin was to accompany them part of the distance, when he would ride away to report to Stuart.

Annie and Mabel rode forward and shook hands with Will and Fred.

"We feel that we owe you much," said Annie. "We hope to be able to make a return some day."

"The happy consciousness of having been able to serve you is return enough," said Will gallantly.

Then they parted. It was a happy party that rode away, the young lieutenant and the two pretty girls. It looked as if the dark clouds which had for a time overshadowed their lives had passed away forever.

Will now turned and bade adieu to Lieutenant Carter.

"We are going to rejoin our company in Jackson's column," he said. "I hope to meet you again."

"Thank you," replied Carter. "The wish is mutual."

Then the Grays wheeled and rode away.

As they galloped on Will and Fred discussed the thrilling events of the past twelve hours with interest. Much had been crowded into that brief space of time.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN INTERVIEW WITH GENERAL JACKSON.

As the Grays rode on the darkness deepened. Will, however, knew the country well and was able to pick out the shortest roads.

It was some while later that they came out into the road which led to the ruins of Clyde Hall.

When they reached the spot there were yet glowing coals in the heap of ruins.

"That is the work of war," said Will as they drew rein a moment. "I tell you, Fred, it is all wrong. Here is a happy home wiped out. Valuable lives have been sacrificed, and to what end? It is all wrong!"

"Yet, we are engaged in making war ourselves," said Fred.

"Very true. If I did not think I was fighting for a principle and for my country I would sheathe my sword forever."

"Doubtless the Yankee soldiers think the same," said Fred.

"That is true," agreed Will. "And that only adds to the evil part of this unholy strife. Yet we must fight on, though I can devoutly pray that peace will soon be declared."

The dead forms of Lieutenant Martin's cavalymen were yet lying about the plantation yard. But Will could not spare the time to see that they were buried.

It was necessary to overtake Jackson's column at the earliest possible moment.

So the little detachment of Grays put spurs to their horses and dashed on. For over an hour they galloped on. Then far in the distance they saw the glimmer of lights.

It was plain that they were campfires. It was not long before this was verified.

A sharp hail came out of the darkness.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"A friend," cried Will as he rode up nearer the picket.

"Give the countersign, friend."

"I have not the countersign," replied Will. "Call out your guard; I can be identified."

A few moments later the Confederate guard came trooping down. The sergeant held an interview with Will.

A messenger was sent to headquarters, and it was not long before an orderly appeared.

"General Jackson gives orders to admit Captain Prentiss and his detachment," he said. "Captain Prentiss will report at once to General Jackson."

The Grays marched through the lines. As they passed, down the line of campfires a cheer went up from their right.

From the fire-lit circle there rushed Boys in Gray, calling to their comrades. Dick Walton and the balance of the little company of Grays were in Jackson's camp.

The meeting was a joyful one.

It did not take long for explanations to follow. The young second lieutenant explained why he had not returned to Clyde Hall.

He had believed the forged order of the villain Clifford to be genuine and had marched on rapidly until he had met Jackson's column.

Not until this moment had the fact been given him that the order was not genuine. He had been waiting with the company for Will to appear.

"If I had known the truth," he cried, "you may be sure we would have gone back to the hall on the double-quick."

"It's all right, Walton," said Will. "You are not to blame. You were badly deceived by Clifford."

"Where is he now?"

"I presume he is behind bars in Richmond by this time."

"He ought to hang," cried Dick. "I wish we had stayed at Clyde Hall. We could have saved the place. But I had no alternative but to obey what I supposed were your orders."

"Yes," admitted Will. "You cannot be blamed in any way. You have not been called into action?"

"Oh, no. We have been waiting for our captain. I reported to General Jackson and he sent out scouts to find you."

"Well, all has come out right. Let the boys turn in for sleep. I am going to report to the general."

Will hastened away and was soon at the entrance to General Jackson's tent. An orderly ushered him in.

General Jackson, one of the most famous of the Confederate commanders, looked up as the young captain of the Grays entered.

"Ah, Prentiss," he said, "I am indeed glad to see you. I have been somewhat anxious about you since your company turned up here without you."

"It was all a dark scheme of that villain Clifford," said Will. "He forged an order which my second lieutenant proceeded to comply with by leaving Clyde Hall and marching hither. Then Clifford descended upon the hall and destroyed it."

"What, Clyde Hall burned?" exclaimed General Jackson.

"It is but a heap of ashes."

"That is too bad. I have visited Colonel Clyde there, and it was one of the most hospitable mansions in Virginia. The scoundrel must be punished."

"He is at this moment, I believe, in Richmond jail."

"Oh, you captured him?"

"Yes, sir."

With this Will told the story of the exciting incidents at Clyde Hall from start to finish.

General Jackson listened with interest. When Will had finished he said:

"I am pleased with your conduct, Captain Prentiss. You have done well and I would gladly name you for promotion."

"I thank you, General Jackson," said Will, "but I prefer to remain with my company."

"Yet you should seek advancement."

"No," replied Will. "War is not to me a chosen profession or the means of gaining a rise in life. It is a hard stern duty which I would gladly abandon if I could."

General Jackson's gaze burned as he looked straight at the young captain.

"Boy," he said, "that is a sentiment which I have never heard from other lips. I cannot name an officer in my army who fights on such a basis as that. That is the only sentiment which should actuate a man to fight, but it is not lived up to. This war is not a just one. It is a deplorable calamity to the nation. Yet, if I did not believe the South were right, I would break my sword and go back to my home this hour."

"General Jackson," said Will, "I do not believe the South is right any more than I believe the North is right. Both are wrong. There should be a better way of settling the feud than by recourse to arms."

A retrospective light shone in the general's eyes. He was silent for some time.

"You may be right. You may be right, Prentiss," he said finally. "But the strife has begun and it must go on. We of the South must fight it out."

"That is true."

"That makes me think, Prentiss. You know we have fought a bloody engagement to-day at Frazier's farm. It was intended to pierce the Union line. Longstreet and Hill have hurled their men into the breach all day, trying to overthrow McCall.

"But they have failed. You see Magruder and Huger did not get up to co-operate, through some misunderstanding. As for myself, Franklin has stood in my path like a mountain. I could not drive him back, and he has kept me in check all the afternoon."

"That is too bad," said Will, "but perhaps to-morrow——"

"To-morrow?" and Jackson shrugged his shoulders. "The chance is lost, my boy. It is too late."

"Too late?"

"Yes. To-night they are falling back. I have learned their point of concentration, and it is the very one I would have chosen myself. There is no spot in this part of Virginia better adapted for a stand than Malvern Hill."

"Malvern Hill!"

"Yes. They are concentrating there. It is not far from their gunboats at Harrison's Landing. I tell you, Prentiss, this campaign is a failure."

"A failure?" exclaimed Will. "Why, we have done nothing but drive the enemy from first to last."

"Yes, we have driven them. But, see what a chance we have had. Not a single regiment should have returned to the north. We have had them cornered repeatedly, only each time to let them slip away."

Will listened with respectful interest. He knew that there was logic in General Jackson's remarks. He knew that he understood the situation thoroughly.

"Yes," continued the general, placing his finger on a map, "just follow this line. They have straggled all the way from Mechanicsville to this point. Our forces have thundered at their heels. But they have only thundered—that is all."

"Why, my boy, their line should have been pierced and doubled up, as was attempted to-day, the very moment they formed in column of retreat. There is the great mistake."

"But, has not the effort been made?"

"The order was given. You can see how the attempt has failed."

"Why has it failed?"

General Jackson stroked his beard.

"Lack of an executive head and hand," he said. "Lack of uniformity of action. It has been from the first just as it has been to-day. A concerted action is ordered. Perhaps Longstreet's division deals a blow, waiting for support. Huger or Magruder or myself, whoever is ordered to support him, does not get up in time. The result is that the foe holds his ground and has time to secure reinforcements. The attempt fails. I could not get there to-day, for Franklin held the bridge against my best efforts. But I don't see why Magruder didn't get up."

"General Magruder expected to co-operate with you. I know when he dispatched me to intercept you he expected to join Longstreet's general assault."

"Well, we both failed," said General Jackson, "but to-morrow, boy, you will see an awful fight. We shall try to storm the Union position at Malvern Hill. If we succeed then we have won the game, and peace will follow. If we fail the war will go on."

Will sat silent for a moment. He had listened with interest to all these reasonings of the great general.

Just then an orderly entered the tent. He gave General Jackson a dispatch.

Will arose to go, but a gesture of the general restrained him.

CHAPTER XV.

THE END OF THE MARCH.

"Wait a moment, Prentiss," he said; "I am not done with you yet."

Will sank back into his chair. The general read the dispatch and knit his brows a moment.

He laid the dispatch on the table and dismissed the orderly with a gesture. Then he said:

"How are your men, Prentiss? Are they equal to a short march?"

"I think they are," replied Will.

"Very good. You can see that this is from Longstreet. Read it."

Will glanced at the message. It was brief and read thus:

"TO GENERAL JACKSON:

"My scouts have brought me information of a movement on your right and from the cross-roads of the Quaker road. I think you had better give it attention, for it may mean a surprise or night attack. Yours cordially,

"LONGSTREET."

General Jackson looked attentively at Will.

"You know the locality?" he asked.

"I do."

"Will you take your company and march out on my right flank. Go down as far as is safe toward the Quaker road. I have suspected that McCall might attempt to cut through my line there. If you find signs of the foe and there is a determined resistance let me know at once, and I will send reinforcements."

Will arose instantly and saluted.

"I will march down there, general," he said. "Your orders shall be obeyed. But if I do not find the foe I will hold that position in bivouac until morning."

"Very well, Prentiss."

Will left the general's tent. He at once hurried back to the quarters of the Grays. He met Fred Randolph.

"Well," cried the young lieutenant, "you made quite a visit with the general. There must be something up."

"There is something up, Fred," cried Will. "Call the boys into line at once."

"What? Another march for us?"

"Yes."

Fred Randolph was not the one to ask questions. He at once ordered the roll to be beaten.

The Grays came tumbling out in lively fashion. In a few moments they were all in line and ready.

Will ordered all camp equipage taken, for he knew that they might have to bivouac in their new position.

The Grays marched down the company street at the double-quick and soon were on their way to the Quaker road.

It was down this road that McClellan had retreated to

Malvern. Every foot of the highway had been fought over most desperately.

The Grays kept on in the darkness until lights twinkling in the distance showed the Union line.

Then a curious sound came from the distance. There was a dull rumble, as if heavy gun carriages were being dragged over ledges. The rattle of bayonets was heard.

Fred stood beside Will in the darkness.

"There is something up over there, Will," he said.

"Beyond a doubt."

"Do you suppose they would venture a night attack?"

Will shook his head.

"I doubt it," he said. "It is my belief that they are erecting some sort of a defense. I believe they intend to make a stand here."

"What are our orders?"

"Our orders are to remain here in line of skirmish until morning. If the foe advances they will feel of us and we will give the alarm. But I don't anticipate anything of the sort."

"Then we might as well bivouac here?"

"Yes. Let a double line of pickets be stationed all along here. They can give the alarm in case of attack, and we will get into line of skirmish quick enough."

"To be sure we will! I'll wager there'll be a big battle to-morrow, Will."

"I think there will."

The young captain's orders were carried out quickly enough. The picket guards were thrown out and all made ready to guard against a surprise.

The position of the Grays was a most dangerous one. They were somewhat in the character now of an advance line, and liable at any moment to be cut off by some movement or evolution of the Union columns.

This would mean annihilation or capture. Neither of these things was pleasant to contemplate, so Will took every precaution.

The rest of the boys, rolling themselves in their blankets, slept on their arms. And so the position was theirs until long after midnight.

Will, who was dozing, was awakened by a touch on the shoulder. One of the guards stood over him.

"Captain Prentiss," he whispered.

"Well?" he asked.

"If you please, sir, there are men in the road below, and they are moving up through the rail fence."

Will sprung to his feet. In an instant the silent alarm was given.

This was done by one of the boys waking his companion, and so on rapidly until the whole company was on its feet.

They brushed the sleep from their eyes and quickly deployed in line of skirmish.

It was a thrilling moment. They had no means of knowing but that the foe would be down upon them soon in overwhelming numbers.

Now what Will expected occurred. There was a startled hail from the picket line and a shot.

Then there was a heavy tramping of feet and the rattle of bayonets. Low-toned orders were heard.

Will gave the order to the Grays to fire. At once the skirmish line blazed. The effect was surprising.

There was a clash of bayonets, a crashing of the rail fence, some desultory shots and the sound of retreating footsteps.

The attack did not materialize. The Union troops fell back hastily.

Will never believed that it was meant for a night attack. It was no doubt a move to change position by some company of Union soldiers and they quickly fell back when they discovered that the desired position was held by a foe.

This ended all adventures of an exciting sort for the night. The Grays, however, remained strictly in line of skirmish until the light of day broke in the east.

Then their position was revealed to them. It caused them great surprise. They were not one hundred yards from the Union picket line.

A whole regiment of the blue lay in a little hollow below them. Will now hastily drew his boys back.

But the position of the Grays had served a valuable purpose. The Union line had been kept back and the road was clear.

But ahead in the far distance loomed the heights of Malvern. There could be seen the glitter of arms and the roll of the drum rose upon the morning air.

Before night those slopes were to be soaked in blood. What part the Grays took in the desperate battle we will leave to a future story, and for the nonce take our leave of Captain Will Prentiss and his Virginia Grays.

THE END.

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